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We don't talk enough about the history of games based on books. It's been a good run; certainly much stronger than the history of videogames inspired by movies or TV. The Metro series is just the latest in a long and quite excellent history of novels either adapted or extended through digital means.

The entire Tom Clancy canon immediately springs to mind, having been started by *Rainbow Six* and Clancy's own interest in moving his stories into the gaming world, but it dates back even further than that into classic fantasy and sci-fi titles. We've had popular classics given new life, such as *The Hobbit*, and we've had even older texts like *Dante's Inferno* translated into game form in some weird and wonderful ways.

The most recent successes have been Metro and The Witcher, of course, both of which have more or less outshone the materials they were originally based on. Both have brought to life what was once only available to our imaginations, but in doing so have managed to maintain so much of the mystery and majesty that made them interesting stories to begin with.

But what makes games better at handling books than films? The longer length perhaps, along with a similar devotion to worldbuilding and lore. Games and books are for sitting with and pondering over long periods of time. They're often structured similarly, in chapters that help to give the sprawling narrative a greater sense of progress. There's more to be explored than I have time and space to fully digest here, but I will definitely be pondering it further in the coming days.



Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR

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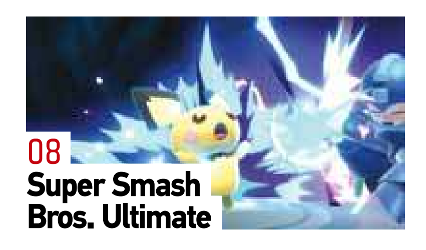

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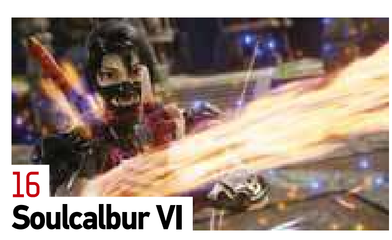
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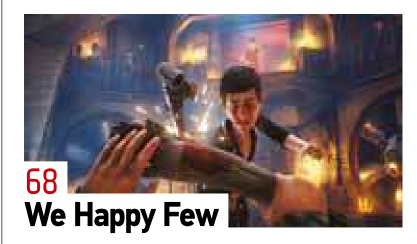
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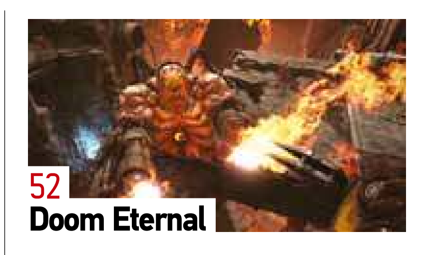

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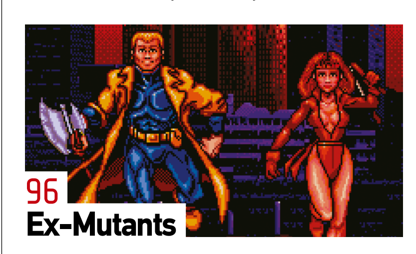
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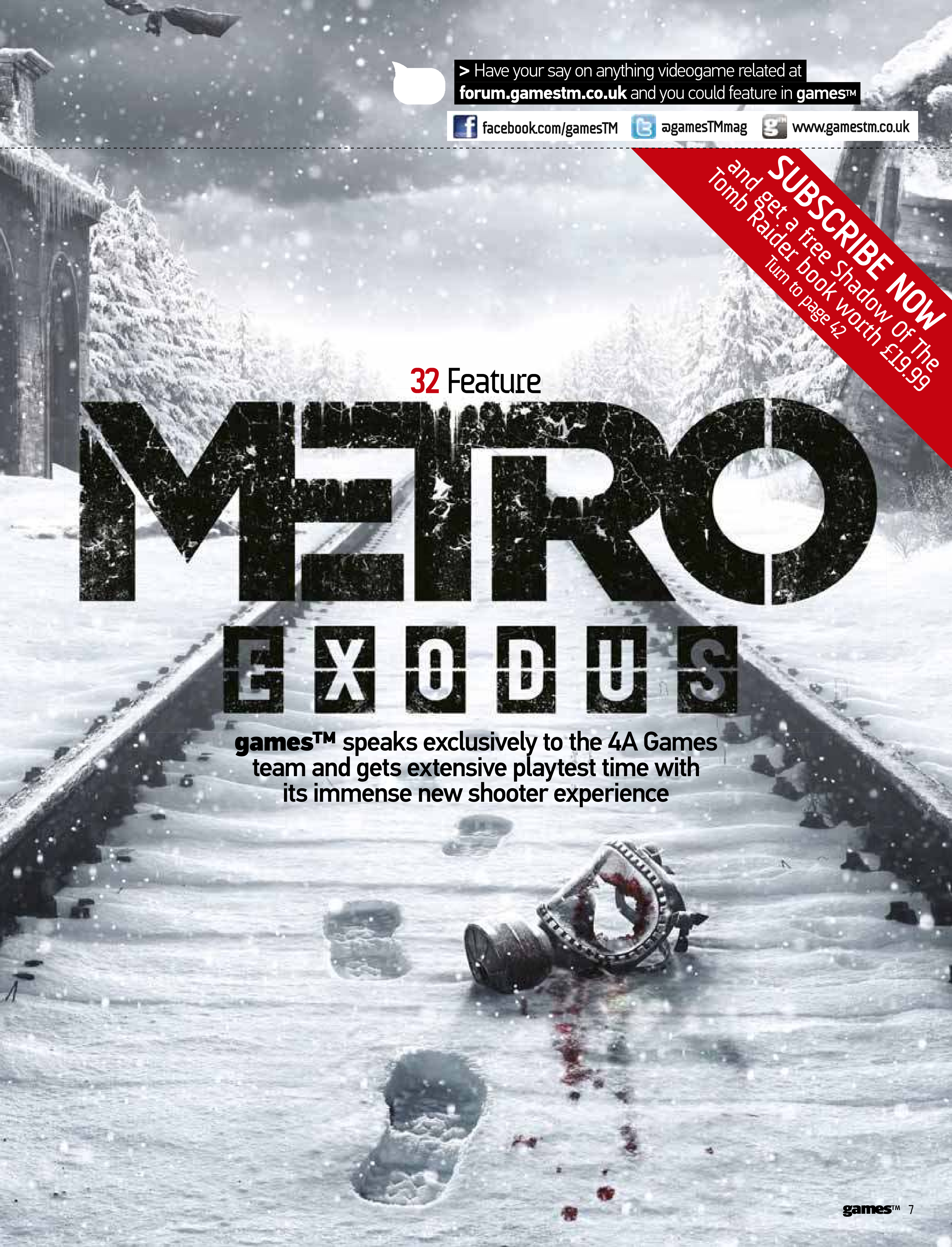
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SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE IS FUN BUT IT'S INCREDIBLY FAMILIAR

→ HANDS-ON WITH NINTENDO'S BIGGEST BRAWLER EVER

FORMAT: **SWITCH** | PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** | DEVELOPER: **SORA LTD., BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **7 DEC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-8**

It has become increasingly difficult to shake the feeling that we've seen all of this before. No, wait. That isn't quite right… you know what, we change our mind; it isn't all that difficult because, well, we *have* seen all of this before. In fact, we've seen it time and time again. *Super Smash Bros.* is quickly approaching its 20th anniversary and, to celebrate, Nintendo is going all in for the series' debut on Switch – the roster expanding in such a way that long-time Nintendo fans are likely to feel a little dizzy in the head – though it isn't necessarily doing so in the way that we had once anticipated.

Where we've seen Nintendo strive for innovation in the past two years, allowing The Legend Of Zelda to fully lean into a modern open-world design model and Super Mario to wholeheartedly embrace its inherent weirdness, we were admittedly a little taken aback to find that the publisher's crossover brawler feels so damned familiar. In an environment where Nintendo is striving for ingenious makeovers of its flagship franchises, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* just feels a little safe – designed to placate large swaths of the player base.

Given the fractured nature of the Smash Bros community, that statement is likely to draw a degree of ire from certain camps. There's always been a suggestion that Smash Bros could be a major player in the competitive/esports scenes, were it not for the fact that its players continue to squabble over which version should be standardised for tournament play. So, let's attempt to break all of this down before all hell breaks loose; *Ultimate* is effectively a deluxe version of *Super Smash Bros.* for Wii U, albeit an iteration with enough tweaks under the hood to make it lean a little closer to *Melee*, with respect to game speed, advanced mechanics and general flow.

On a broader level, that means you should expect yet another competitive brawler that attempts to strike an unholy balance between complexity and accessibility, packed with so much fan service that your eyes will struggle to settle on any one detail in amongst the chaos that is the Smash Bros. traditional combat loop.

The question of whether Nintendo would take the launch of new hardware as an opportunity to usher in some serious mechanical and system-end changes to Smash Bros. has been answered with a metaphorical shrug from co-developers Sora Ltd and Bandai Namco Studios. This particular studio collaboration, the one that brought us *Super Smash Bros.* for Wii U and 3DS – reuniting under the stewardship of long-time director Masahiro Sakurai – has instead decided to deliver the *ultimate* version of that old familiar formula.

That's meant literally, rather than figuratively by the way. Regardless of where it is that your loyalty lies in the Smash Bros. community, you'll be hard pressed to find anything to rally against here on a surface level. *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* plays smoothly, looks gorgeous and, yes, it features every single character that has appeared in a Smash game to date, along with pretty much every stage worth caring about included from day one too.

IN BRIEF
The legendary fighting franchise makes its long-awaited debut on the Nintendo Switch

That means we are seeing the return of fan-favourite third-party characters, such as Bayonetta, Cloud Strife, Ryu, Solid Snake and Sonic – a legal wrangling that sounds as if it has pushed Sakurai to the brink. With the promise of so many characters stretching the pantheon of Nintendo franchises we're also seeing a ton of overlap, with multiple variants of certain characters wading into the fray.

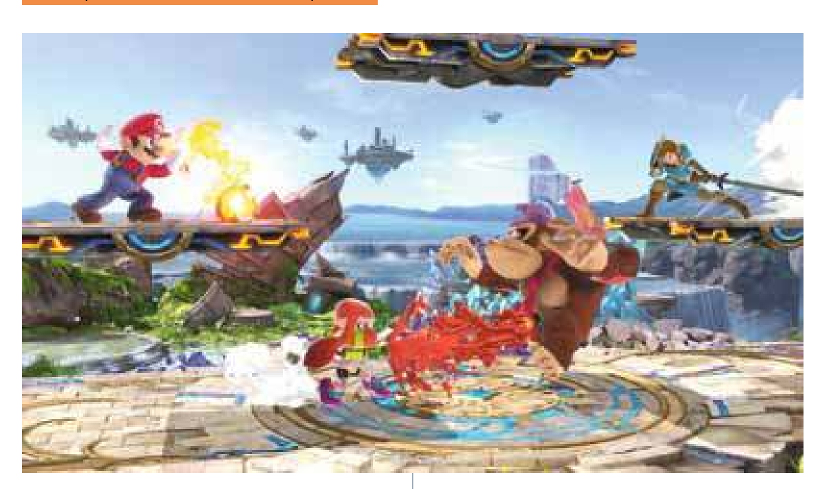
There are, for example, three versions of Link available, drawing from *Breath Of The Wild*, *A Link Between Worlds* (Toon Link) and *Ocarina Of Time* (Young Link), while the rowdy bunch from Fire Emblem have seen their visuals updated to better reflect their most recent appearances on Wii U. We're also seeing Nintendo introduce a handful of harmless palette swaps, with Daisy echoing the moveset of Peach with a few mild alterations introduced to change up play in subtle ways.

What we are looking at here is 65 playable characters. For us to receive a ridiculous roster such as this, perhaps it should be expected that certain elements of the game would have to stay the same. Nintendo is reusing as many animations and character models as it possibly can, with the art style itself almost identical to *Smash Bros.* on Wii U – save for some tweaks made to better support the updated textures and stage lighting thanks to the technology available in the Switch.

It's out of character for Nintendo to deliver something like *Ultimate*. The company rarely pursues traditional sequels, but that seems to have been a necessity to support the development of such a large game. This isn't a leap like we've traditionally seen between something like *Melee* and *Brawl*, but rather it's more akin to the gradual lines of iteration we see so commonly from Capcom – the Smash Bros. equivalent of a *Super Street Fighter 2 Turbo* to *Street Fighter 2*, if you will.

That's not to say that Sora isn't pursuing *any* mechanical changes to play. The directional air dodge is making a return, although it has been revamped for *Ultimate*. It is in essence a blend of the systems seen in *Melee* and *Brawl*. Characters will once again be able to dodge to the left or right while in the air in an effort to gain a momentum boost (and temporary intangibility), though restrictions have been put in place to ensure that it can't be overused – using any combination of a dodge, air dodge or roll in quick succession will drastically decrease the amount of invincibility frames gained. It means it's a viable option to get out of harm's way in a pinch, but continued survival is more dependent on spacing and avoiding attacks with your basic slate of movement mechanics.

We can also confirm, after getting our hands on an updated build, that the wavedashing technique – a popular competitive move in *Melee* that allows players to effectively air dodge diagonally from the ground to gain momentum and quickly cover ground – is not possible in *Ultimate*. Wavelanding *is* still a possibility – air dodging down to a platform from the air to quickly slide across it – though the combination of considerable landing lag and the increased array of moves that can now be dash-cancelled call into »





We hope you like Pokémon because there are an absolute ton of them in the game, with Sora and Bandai Namco clearly anticipating a lot of *Pokémon GO* and *Pokémon: Let's Go* fans to be enticed into playing.

question its viability as a competitive technique. Still, it's early days yet and we are only just beginning to grasp what changes are being made with respect to hitstuns, knockbacks, shielding and smash attacks. One point worth noting is that the Final Smash super moves have been greatly improved, having much less impact on the flow of play without losing their cinematic edge.

Our play session would also seem to indicate that random stage hazards play a bigger role than ever before – casual players like nothing more than a big mess of chaos, apparently – although Nintendo has indicated that the final game will indeed come with the ability to switch these off and on at will, hopefully meaning *Ultimate* has more stages in contention at a competitive level. It is, in fact, little tweaks such as this that would indicate Nintendo is ready to pour more support into Smash Bros. as a viable esport – taking the lessons it has learned from *Splatoon 2* and applying them here at a development level. The UI has been subtly overhauled in order to more easily (and cleanly) convey information to observers, while the mechanical changes we've already gotten our head around seem designed to give competitive players plenty of room to experiment with what's on offer here.

We said at the beginning that *Ultimate* feels and looks familiar – and it does – but that statement almost betrays one basic, irrefutable fact: that it's an absolute pleasure to play. Jumping into a game with a handful of players is still a total delight, and it feels wonderful; the action is smooth and kinetic, a visually noisy game that still manages to retain clarity – it's an impressive accomplishment, as ever.

> "JUMPING INTO A GAME WITH A HANDFUL OF PLAYERS IS STILL A TOTAL DELIGHT. ULTIMATE FEELS WONDERFUL TO PLAY"

Does it matter that Nintendo isn't taking any major steps to overhaul the brand? Given how entertaining the core play is and how respectful *Ultimate* is to everything that has come before it, many will argue that it doesn't matter at all. *Ultimate* could very well be the best party game on Switch, a competitive fighting game that will hold the attention of the hardcore without keeping the casual audiences that just want to see Fox McCloud falcon punch Kirby in the face at bay. And really, what more could you ask for from a Super Smash Bros. game?

1 LINK

ROSTER NUMBER: 03

Link is heavily stylised to reflect his most recent appearance in *Breath Of The Wild*. He's donning the Champion's Tunic as standard, the Hookshot is out of the equation (Link now performs grabs like regular characters) while the Sheikah Slate has been introduced to let the Hero Of Time throw remote detonation bombs out into stages. He can also now fire two arrows at once and his Final Smash involves the use of the Ancient Bow.

2 SNAKE

ROSTER NUMBER: 31

Solid Snake is making his highly anticipated return after his debut in *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* oh so many years ago. But that isn't what has us *really* excited; you see, original voice actor David Hayter has confirmed that he will be reprising the role of Snake. After Hayter was overlooked for *MGSV: The Phantom Pain* we feared we would never see him in this role again. Good things *do* come to those who wait.

3 CAPTAIN FALCON

ROSTER NUMBER: 11

Captain Falcon will be receiving a number of small minor tweaks as the development teams work to bring characters over from *Super Smash Bros.* for Wii U to the updated engine on Switch. Popular moves such as Falcon Dive and Raptor Boost have new animations, meaning competitive players will likely need to rework base strategies here, while new moves are being introduced such as a ground smash that materialises as a flaming punch.

4 BAYONETTA

ROSTER NUMBER: 63

Everybody's favourite gaming witch returns to the fold relatively unaltered after her last appearance, though fans will notice some subtle shifts to the core move set. Bayonetta's potency in the air, in particular, has been somewhat nerfed; held and up aerial attacks now have increased landing lag, while the F-air knockback can no longer immediately combo into After Burner. It's small changes like this that ensure Bayonetta will be a little tougher to manage on the ground.

5 INKLING

ROSTER NUMBER: 64

One of the coolest new additions to the roster is Inkling from Splatoon. Her moveset is a mixture of close-range attacks and an array of special moves that utilise weapons from the Splatoon series. You'll need to be aware of depleting ink resources, as well as the best moments to bring out items such as the Splat Roller and Splattershot. If you're looking for new gameplay options in Smash Bros., well, Inkling has them all.

6 SONIC

ROSTER NUMBER: 38

Sonic is riding a bit of a high right now. After the release of *Sonic Mania* the character has had something of a resurgence in popularity and he's clearly pretty happy about it. The character is more expressive and joyful, grinning as he dashes across the map and punches his old rival Mario in the face. An aesthetic change aside, Sonic's moveset is almost identical from that of *Super Smash Bros.* for Wii U.

PREPARE FOR BATTLE

→ How some of our favourite brawlers out of the 65-strong roster will be changing for SSBU



7 SAMUS

ROSTER NUMBER: 04

While we were hoping to get but a small hint as to how Samus's appearance would be changing for the hotly anticipated *Metroid Prime 4*, *Ultimate* will instead carry over her character design based on *Metroid: Other M*. While that's a little upsetting, it's great to see the character receive new air-dodge animations, faster aerial mobility and more versatility on the ground.

8 CLOUD STRIFE

ROSTER NUMBER: 61

It's great to see Cloud make his return, though a number of changes have been made to his core aerial attacks and special moves. While his aerials have less landing lag to contend with, the attacks do have less range and viability from ground. You'll also now have to contend with the fact that Cloud's Limit Cross Slash will lose its charge if it isn't used within 15 seconds and will gradually chip away from being struck.

9 RIDLEY

ROSTER NUMBER: 65

Ridley of *Metroid Prime* fame makes his debut in Smash Bros. and it's a rather sizable addition to the roster. Like, literally. Ridley is huge, larger than almost every other character in the game. While that makes the villain a natural target, Ridley also happens to be an absolute powerhouse, causing huge swaths of damage to anybody unlucky enough to get caught by one of his slashes or laser beams.

10 WOLF

ROSTER NUMBER: 44

Star Fox's Wolf O'Donnell actually appeared back in *Smash Bros. Brawl* as a secret character, only unlocked after a player completed 450 VS. Mode matches or clearing Boss Mode with Fox or Falco. Of course, many missed this entirely and so his appearance in *Ultimate* feels pretty fresh. The character's look (based this time on *Star Fox: Zero*), his moveset and animations have been entirely overhauled for this outing.

11 MARIO

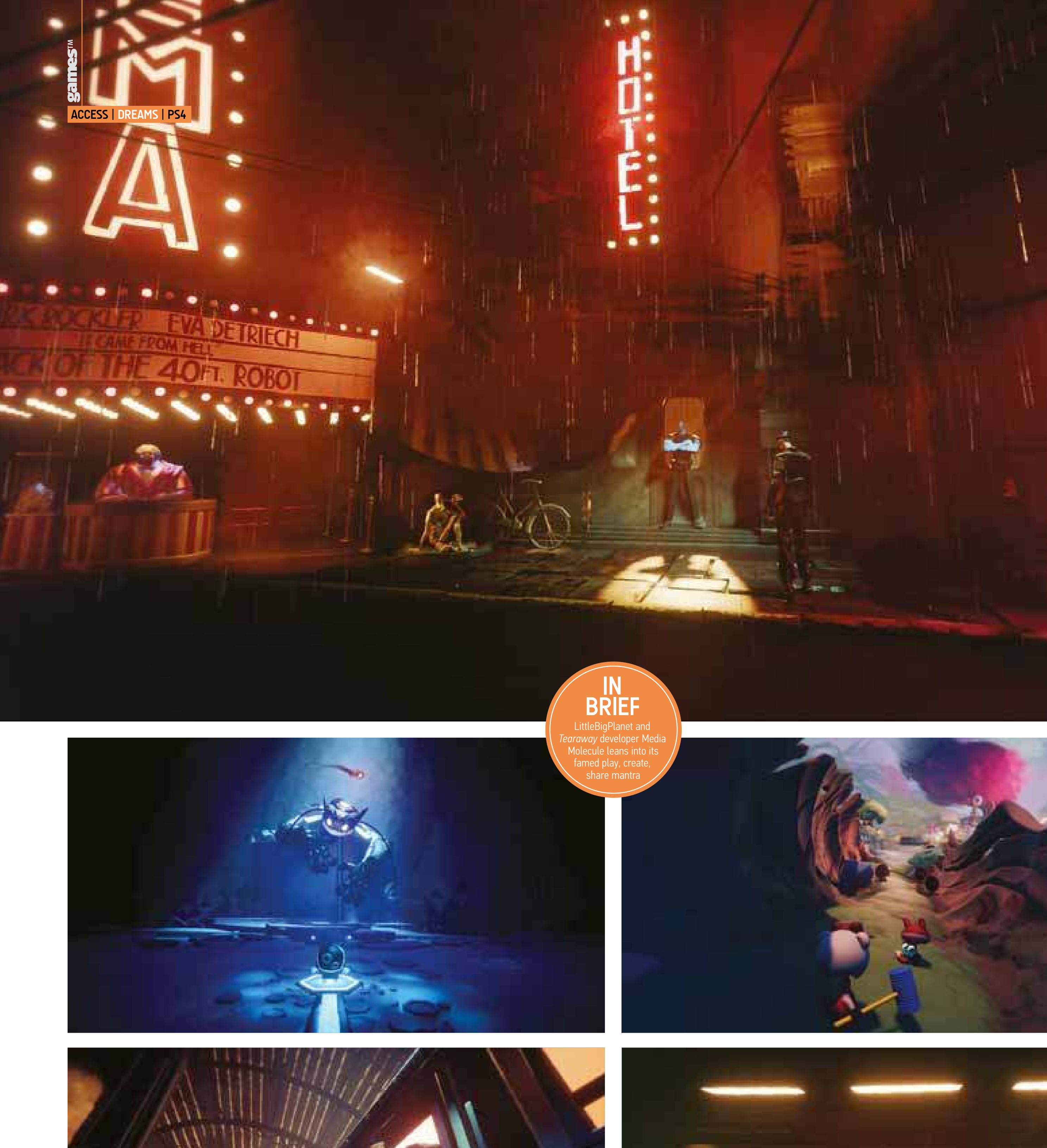
ROSTER NUMBER: 01

Mario feels incredibly similar to his appearances in previous Super Smash games, but that isn't to say the Nintendo talisman doesn't have a few new tricks up his sleeve… erm, or should that be hat? That's right, Cappy is making his return though he can no longer posses anything it comes into contact with. Instead, Mario can use Cappy to facilitate high jumps to help avoid incoming attacks.

12 DAISY

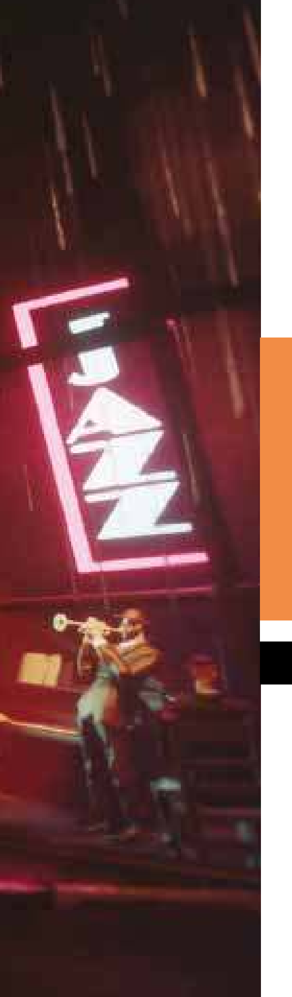
ROSTER NUMBER: 13

Ultimate marks the first time that she will be a fully fledged member of the roster. Daisy is being pitched as an Echo Fighter to Peach, effectively meaning that while she shares many of the same animations (and a similar moveset) she will indeed have some new moves to call her own – such as utilising a Blue Toad and flowers for attacks instead of hearts.



IN BRIEF

LittleBigPlanet and *Tearaway* developer Media Molecule leans into its famed play, create, share mantra



DREAMS NEEDS TO EMERGE FROM THE SHADOWS OF DEVELOPMENT

→ WILL A LACK OF COMMUNITY VISIBILITY HARM THIS EXPRESSIVE GAME CREATION TOOL?

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT** | DEVELOPER: **MEDIA MOLECULE** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

Who is this for, really? It's a question that we find ourselves coming back to time and time again in our more cynical moments. *Dreams* – obtuse by its very nature – demands a lot to fully wrap our head around what it is attempting to offer. Every time we are given a fresh look at the upcoming PlayStation 4 exclusive we find ourselves thrust into a pursuit of understanding, of trying to figure out exactly what it is that Media Molecule has spent the last six years investing its time, resources, and creative energy into constructing, because sometimes it all seems like a lot.

Dreams isn't a videogame in the traditional sense, even less so than LittleBigPlanet; if you want to get all arty about it, *Dreams* is but an empty canvas awaiting a brushstroke – good lord this makes us sound so pretentious and there really isn't a lot of that about Media Molecule. Charming, quaint, hipsterish and chintzy seem like more comfortable monikers.

Unlike LBP – which encouraged players to build patchwork levels, drawing from a bank of pre-defined assets and music – *Dreams* is far more ambitious in its scope. Its creation suite is effectively a wide-ranging collection of art assets, developer tools and editor options that should allow *anybody* to create their own gaming experience, regardless of their experience or expertise with traditional development tools or practices. Whether that is true is yet to be proven, of course.

It's difficult for Media Molecule to easily convey just how streamlined its toolsets will be and how flexible its systems are via demonstrations from afar. As a show of good faith (not to mention proof of concept) every one of the elements that comprise the story campaign levels in *Dreams* has been created within the game engine provided by Media Molecule's talented developers. That's to be proof that, should you take the time to get your head around the dizzying depth of what's on offer here, you too can create quality experiences that can be enjoyed by folks the world over.

> "THE BETA WILL ULTIMATELY GO A LONG WAYS TO PROVING WHETHER THE COMPLEX CREATION TOOLS ARE ACCESSIBLE ENOUGH FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE"

How difficult that endeavour will ultimately prove to be for a bright-eyed player, wielding little more than their imaginations, remains to be seen. While Media Molecule has certainly attempted to demonstrate that the suite of tools it has engineered are intuitive, expansive and surprisingly deep, we still have little insight into how an average player will interpret what is put in front of them. While LittleBigPlanet proved that there is a huge community out there eager to learn and create, there's certainly a difficulty hike to be found between creating within 2.5D and full 3D spaces. Given that *Dreams* also introduces the capacity to make use of complex level design tools such as logic gates, event triggers and timers – not to mention more general utility options that will let you create cutscenes, build assets, and compose full music tracks – we fear that it might ultimately prove to be too much to handle for a vast majority of us attempting to approach it.

The possibilities are huge and, as a result, so are the varying degrees of complexity. Which is to say, so is the likelihood of encountering friction points as your creativity clashes with a command of development tools.

As the protracted development of *Dreams* winds on, we're becoming increasingly eager to see the launch of the proposed beta (something that's been in limbo since 2016). Seeing experienced level designers piece together impressive and complex 3D levels in just a handful of hours – as is routinely demonstrated on the studio's official Twitch streams – is certainly impressive, but it isn't revealing of how the final product will be utilised by the community. The beta will ultimately go a long ways to proving whether the complex creation tools are accessible enough for a general audience to get involved with or whether the vast majority of us will ultimately prefer to stand on the sidelines idly, awaiting new maps and creations to fall into our lap by way of the 'Dream Surfing' mode, which constantly cues up new stages and levels for your enjoyment.

It might sound like we are being unnecessary critical of what, we hope, will ultimately prove to be one of the greatest avenues of creative expression ever handed to players in this industry. We trust that Media Molecule understands the role that the audience – both those that feel emboldened to create and those that just want to play – will have in making *Dreams* an ongoing success, we're just eager to see the general populous get its hands all over it the tools sooner rather than later.

■ Above: Every single one of the levels in *Dreams* has been pieced together using all of the tools and assets available as part of the core creation tools that all players will have access to. Left: We can't wait to see how players take on the challenge of 3D game creation. We anticipate that the live servers will be a treasure trove of both bad ideas and excellent concepts. Below: There is no ETA on the arrival of *Dreams* or its long-awaited beta, though we are anticipating that the latter will launch later this year.

BLACK OPS 4 DOESN'T PLAY LIKE A TRADITIONAL CALL OF DUTY GAME, ARE YOU READY TO EMBRACE IT?

→ HANDS-ON WITH THE PRIVATE BETA REVEALS BIG CHANGES ARE INCOMING

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** | DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH** | RELEASE: **12 OCTOBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-10**

The time has come for us all to reconcile with the fact that Call Of Duty has changed. The series is no longer leading the shooter market, instead it is finally settling into a position in which it is merely following the trends within it. Call Of Duty is fighting to reclaim its relevancy amidst the first genuine redistribution of power that we've seen in this sector in over a decade. *Battle Royale* is dominating with respect to sever population; the hero shooters are consuming community conversation; and shared-world experiences are redefining how we catalogue and consume the adventures we have with our fellow players. You can see much of this reflected in the way *Black Ops 4* carries itself both on and off the battlefield. Treyarch has made none of these decisions in bad faith, nor do they necessarily come with any overt consequences to the core fun and appeal of Call Of Duty's tight multiplayer action – though reconciliation is key if you want any hope in hell of enjoying this year's instalment. Free your mind of the burden of expectation, for a pretty good time awaits those that do.

In many respects, *Black Ops 4* is the best Call Of Duty has been in a very long time. Treyarch has achieved this by rebuking nostalgic elements of the multiplayer design, many of which have kept Call Of Duty grounded in the past – even as other developers took the series to the skies and the stars. That all said, your mileage with this October's release will likely hinge entirely on whether you love or loathe the returning Specialists: ten unique characters that bring specific skills, abilities and unique flavours to the firefights to be had across Treyarch's impeccably designed three-lane biomes of frustration and adulation.

Activision's three lead studios have been toying with changing this formula for years now, attempting to evolve (if not outright replace) the class creation and Perks system that's been so integral to Call Of Duty's success; Create-A-Soldier in *Ghosts*, Specialists' introduction in *Black Ops III*, refined under the guise of Operators in *Infinite Warfare* and, of course, Divisions in *WWII*. All of this iteration has led us to this moment, to Call Of Duty's expected embrace of the hero shooter model. Having less agency over the construction of your soldier is a culture shock for sure, although *Black Ops 4* instead asks you to embrace the idea that you are playing as a distinctive character – complete with backstory, lore and pre-defined strengths and weaknesses – as part of a larger squad. There are constantly a variety of offensive, defensive and support abilities in play; understanding and tracking squad composition is now key, as too is maintaining your health levels, keeping stock of ability cooldowns that run across your respawns (a fine replacement for Scorestreaks), and the ever-shifting location of the frontline. All of this is key to understanding and appreciating *Black Ops 4*'s new-found rhythm to play.

> "IF THE RECENT CLOSED BETA HAS PROVED ANYTHING, IT'S THAT THERE IS MORE EMPHASIS THAN EVER BEFORE ON SMART INTERPLAY BETWEEN SQUADS"

If the recent closed beta has proved anything, it's that there is more emphasis than ever before on smart interplay between squads, navigating objective requirements and tactical execution of abilities. This isn't to say that *Black Ops 4* necessarily feels all that much like *Overwatch* or *Rainbow Six: Siege*, but it has clearly taken heed of their successes and moulded them into a shape that better fits the twitchy combat of Call Of Duty. It means that the Lone Wolf mantra that came to define Call Of Duty is essentially dead. There can only ever be one of each Specialist active in the field at any one time, and they have all been keenly designed to play off of one another – going it alone isn't just ill advised, it's the fastest way to find frustration.

Combine all of this with a manual health system and a shift in the way that guns function across the board (each now uses predictive recoil patterns, allowing you to constantly make micro-adjustments to your aiming and shooting lines) and you're looking at a new breed of Call Of Duty in *Black Ops 4*. The time-to-kill has been increased, edging out speedy encounters in favour of tactical pursuit of enemies – gunfights now feel like tense duals, with each player having to rely on positioning and tracking as much as they do aggression and sharp reactions.

Black Ops 4 is slower, for sure, than any of its predecessors, though that isn't necessarily a negative. The series has been due a refresh – *Modern Warfare* is over a decade old, after all – and we're happy to see that Treyarch is approaching such a task with bold initiative. *Black Ops 4* feels like it has been tightly designed around competitive action with a basis in moment-to-moment cooperation, built to bring groups of friends together and to better support the lucrative esports market. It means that come this October you'll need to be ready to adjust to a mentality shift in the way you approach and engage with Call Of Duty; it's a gamble, for sure, but it's one we are excited to see Treyarch making all the same.

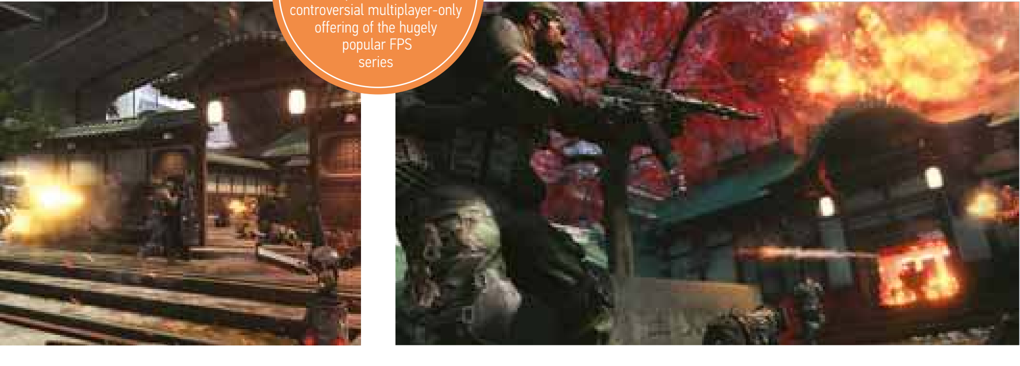




Above: While the Specialists come with pre-defined abilities and skills, you'll still be able to customise your loadouts, equip new weapons and play with a wide variety of attachments. **Right:** The beta has proven to be instrumental, giving Treyarch plenty to chew over as it looks to refine its systems ahead of launch. Frame-rate concerns have been noted, as too have issues of balance surrounding individual gear options such as the Stim packs and Body Armour.

IN BRIEF

Treyarch returns to the Black Ops universe with a controversial multiplayer-only offering of the hugely popular FPS series







FOG OF WAR

One of the best changes to Call Of Duty's UX presentation comes courtesy of the mini-map, a familiar element of the HUD which now has a layer of fog applied to it. It means that the map is largely obscured beyond a variety of small circles, denoting the position of you and your allies. While some perks, such as the returning UAV, will increase visibility this shift actively encourages communication between the Specialists on the field. No longer can you merely go off in search of enemy icons for easy kills; the most immediate change here ensures that you spend more time actively surveying the stage in front of you (rather than letting your eyes drift to the map constantly), which reduces the number of occasions you get caught off guard by enemies sprinting around a corner and immediately nailing you with a shotgun.

WHY SOULCALBUR VI IS THE PEOPLE'S CHAMPION



IN BRIEF
Soulcalibur VI jumps back in time to redefine its place in the fighting world and keep its accessible heritage open to a new generation

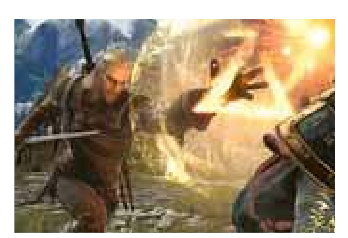
→ BANDAI NAMCO'S LATEST LEANS TOWARDS ACCESSIBILITY OVER COMPETITION

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **BANDAI NAMCO** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **19 OCT 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**



FAN SERVICE FIRST

1 The world of fighting games has broadly been straddling the line between nostalgic fan service and hardcore, competition grade feature sets in recent years, hoping to draw in former arcade stalwarts and esports pros in equal measure. While *Soulcalibur VI* certainly isn't giving up on some competitive potential, it looks to be harking back to the past more with its roster and to the first *Soulcalibur*.



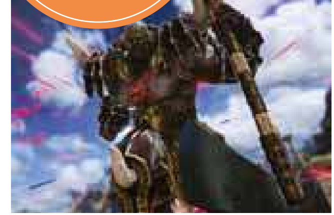
EXPANDED ROSTER

2 As we go to press character creation has just been confirmed although we don't have a mass of detail about it, but even so the roster of characters is a who's who of classic fighters in updates of their most iconic looks. Fan favourites like Voldo and Astaroth are the most recent confirmations and the presence of Geralt feels like a very good fit. More so than Yoda, at the very least. The variety on offer is very pleasing.



OPEN AND ACCESSIBLE

3 For us, Soulcalibur has always been a fighter for the people. By that we mean that it never felt terribly burdened by a need to stick with one fighter and learn them inside out. The most exciting moves felt accessible and even a relative newcomer could find their feet quickly. There's depth there and pros can find ways to chain together devastating moves, but the basics are very easy to grasp and that remains true here.



REVERSAL EDGE

4 Activated by pressing the right bumper on a controller, Reversal Edge queues up a face off where different moves can beat or be beaten by others. It's like a more complex rock, paper, scissors, but the end result is a very cool duel and combo attack for the winner that can turn a game. The flipside of this is that it's so much down to chance that pro players may avoid it, but for those just after a fun bout, it should be very enjoyable.

CUTTING THROUGH THE HYPE OF RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

→ THE BUZZ IS GETTING LOUDER, THE FACTS ARE GETTING CLEARER

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **26 OCTOBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

Hype gets a bad rap, as we're sure we've mentioned before. It can be misplaced or overreach the quality of a game that's on the horizon, but it reflects a hope in all of us as gaming fans that the next big game or the next big sequel will elevate the medium, or at the very least give us something we've never seen before. Anything coming out of Rockstar seems like a worthy focus of such hopes, but now that we've managed to get a closer look at the real gameplay behind this highly anticipated prequel, does it stand up to scrutiny?

For the most part, we would say yes, but clearly by saying that we're allowing some room for doubt to creep in. Any game that's attempting something this diverse and on such a scale is taking risks and leaving space for holes to appear, but overall, it is deeply impressive. Rockstar has talked about a living world in this game, which it did a rather nice job with in *Red Dead Redemption* as well. In this follow-up we can see a much richer ecosystem of wildlife in every location, from rodents and birds in towns to lizards and predators in the deserts, or bears, wolves and more in the forests. There's the promise of interactivity between these different elements that if it fulfils itself would be very exciting.

Then of course there are the NPCs who were an important part of the game last time out with the reputation system, and that's returning here with some important mechanics-based additions. Context-sensitive interactions through the left trigger appear to give you different ways of greeting, intimidating or just vaguely acknowledging passers by and Rockstar has said that these interactions will chain together, feeding into your reputation system and perhaps leading to evolved interactions should you cross paths with a character again. What this means as a player experience is a lot more control over how Arthur Morgan conducts himself out in the world than we might have previously assumed. As an enforcer for Dutch van der Linde we imagined that Morgan was going to be a pretty remorseless and uncaring soul by default, but that looks a little more open now.

> "ANY GAME THAT'S ATTEMPTING SOMETHING THIS DIVERSE AND ON SUCH A SCALE IS TAKING RISKS"

The real test for *Red Dead Redemption II* and something we won't be able to make a judgement on until many hours into the game is just how varied and reactive these little interactions and chance encounters will be. We probably all remember the little roadside encounters from the previous game and how the distressed occupants of an overturned wagon would call out to you, only to open fire as you slowed. We remember that being kind of incredible the first time it happens, fun the second time when we could anticipate it and then a little annoying as it continued again and again. These kinds of ideas can be great as a one-off but become diluted over time, so we'll need to watch out for that very carefully in the weeks leading up to release.

Probably our biggest area of concern, and even then it's only mild concern, surrounds the game's character engine and animation. First, we should say that the RAGE engine appears to have some significant upgrades in terms of character model physics from its use in *Grand Theft Auto V*. When enemies are shot they buckle and fall in ways that appear very reactive to the place where they were shot, the pull of gravity, the nature of the terrain and other factors. That should make shootouts even more chaotic, which is good. And hand-to-hand combat is also vastly improved with a lot more fluid moves and combinations to be called upon, which is handy since Morgan's job will often involve roughing people up without killing them. From the gameplay we've seen though some of the combat animation still feels a little stiff, almost as if frames are missing, breaking up that fluidity of motion that seems to come so naturally elsewhere. And Morgan's facial expressions don't appear to change much outside of cut scenes, which may be asking a lot of a game on this scale, but it was something we noticed. This won't likely be a game-breaking issue, but it could break the immersive feel that so much of the rest of this world is achieving, and it's something we'll be looking closely at going forward.

The RAGE engine returns with Euphoria physics under the hood giving as much realism as possible to the physicality of the game. Horses were a standout in this regard in the last *RDR* and they look even better in this game from what we've seen so far.







Above: As we understand it *Red Dead Redemption II* takes place largely in the South and South East US, not far removed from the last game but extended out a little further East, giving us access to a wider variety of terrain, all of which looks absolutely gorgeous. **Right:** We're not 100 per cent on this, but it looks like *RDR2* will be following in *Max Payne 3*'s footsteps and restricting you to carrying one long gun and possibly two single-handed guns at any one time. Anything else you'll need to stash in saddle bags on your horse.

Wanted levels seem to be more responsive with clear indicators of what authorities are doing and opportunities to stop and silence witnesses to prevent things getting out of hand quickly. You might even be able to talk your way out of trouble.

IN BRIEF

It's the last days of the outlaw and the van der Linde gang is hoping to make one last break for freedom. What will it cost to make it?







BUSY WORK

→ So much to do, so much time to do it

Filling up your time in an open world is so important and Rockstar has been pretty good about giving you things to entertain yourself with between missions in the past, but perhaps not as well as others have done since its last big release. *Red Dead Redemption II* seems to be chocked full of busy work, but thankfully it seems to have learned the lessons of Roman constantly calling you to spend time bowling or playing darts, as these won't be essential chores, just interesting ones.

Managing your camp with the rest of the gang looks like the biggest side-occupation, as you can do jobs around the campsite, hunt and fish for food or generally interact with your group by playing games of cards or other hobbies. This is also likely where you'll be able to tend to your horses, building up your bond with them by brushing and feeding them. Working on that bond will mean they behave generally better under pressure later, so it should be time well spent.

And out in the world you'll be able to sell off your hunting kills for cash rather than taking them back to camp if you want to, attend saloons and the entertainments they provide, and much more. It's all very promising.

10 REASONS YOU MUST RETURN TO NO MAN'S SKY

→ HELLO GAMES HAS OVERHAULED ITS DIVISIVE SPACE EXPLORATION SIM AND IT IS ABSOLUTELY WORTH YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION



FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **HELLO GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **1-16**

PERSEVERANCE PAID OFF

1 Two years after the loudest contingent of angry gamers turned against Hello Games for being – if anything – a little too forthright in its ambition and rhetoric, the small independent studio has proven once and for all that perseverance really does pay off. *No Man's Sky* is now the game many of us believed it could one day become thanks to the arrival of the transformative *NEXT* expansion.

SHIFTIN PERSPECTIVE

2 The free update has given many a new perspective on *No Man's Sky*, and we do mean that literally and figuratively. While millions are already working their way back across the galaxy and enjoying the refined experience, they will have discovered that the entire game can now be played in third-person. This has had a pretty huge impact on how the game looks and plays.

IT'S FREAKING GORGEOUS

3 *No Man's Sky* was always a stunner, but the *NEXT* update has taken this to a whole new level. The game now comes with increased draw distances and improved lighting/atmospheric effects to help those horizons really sizzle. Improved water effects and textures across the board also ensure that *No Man's Sky* is one of the best looking titles out there right now.

SENSE OF SCALE

4 With the game now playable in third-person, Hello Games has had to make a number of rather smart tweaks to the core visual design of the worlds you are exploring and ransacking. The planetary procedural generation system has been modified, not only to increase the diversity and variety found in each of the created ecosystems and biomes, but to give each planet a better and more realistic sense of scale too.

MULTIPLAYER FINALLY ARRIVES

5 Hello Games rolled out the foundations for multiplayer earlier in the year through the *Atlas Rises* update, though it has now taken it to the next level. Up to four players can now play together directly in a party, while the game supports up to 16 in the same instance of a server system (those not in your party are represented as glowing orbs). It's proven to be surprisingly non-combative.









IN BRIEF
After two years of updates Hello Games has relaunched its space explorer bringing with it a new sense of optimism

CO-OPERATION IS KEY

6 The heart of the multiplayer experience is co-operation. While most seem to be using the system to simply enjoy the gorgeous vistas together, Hello Games has also enabled joint base building allowing you and your friends to put together impressive structures as a group when landing on new systems. It's all pretty chill, to be honest.

LEAVE YOUR MARK

7 The building system has been overhauled entirely. There is no arbitrary limit to what you can construct, with *No Man's Sky* allowing for unlimited building should you have the space. You're also able to build multiple bases across multiple planets, all the while taking advantage of a modified building system that puts an emphasis on manipulating both the landscape and each individual piece of the construction.

CUSTOMISE YOUR AVATAR

8 As you're now able to see other players out in the world and your own avatar, Hello Games has introduced an array of new customisation options to help set your character apart from the other wayward adventurers you may encounter out in the universe. While the options are pretty limited right now, Hello Games is still committed to expanding upon this element as the months wind on.

A FRESH STORY

9 Further work has been done on the game's narrative and main quest. The opening has been overhauled once again to better explain the game's systems, while the game also puts base building and access to freighters in front of you much earlier. It helps make for a more enjoyable experience, with Hello Games eager to make it as frictionless as possible.

IT'S FAMILIAR FUN

10 At its heart, this is the same *No Man's Sky* experience we've been enjoying for the last two years. The focus is on gathering and managing resources, on pushing deeper and deeper into the heart of the universe, but the overall game feels better to play than ever before. It's more complete and accessible, chilled out and enjoyable. Give it a try, you won't regret it.

VIGOR DELIVERS SURVIVAL INTENSITY IN BITE SIZE CHUNKS

→ RESOURCE GATHERING AND BASE BUILDING GETS SOME BATTLE-ROYALE INFLUENCED TWEAKS

FORMAT: **XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **GAME PREVIEW** | PLAYERS: **1-8**

While the battle royale genre is obviously dominating the shooter world at the moment we've been seeing some interesting takes on survival gameplay of late and Bohemia Interactive's latest, *Vigor,* is another interesting example. Leaning more towards survival and resource gathering than combat, the *DayZ* developer is leaning on its landscape and scavenging skills over its fighting prowess, which might be for the best as we'll discuss shortly. As it stands *Vigor* is available in Game Preview on Xbox One with rotating maps allowing for two locations to be explored at any given time and rounds lasting no longer than about 20 minutes max, although they're often much shorter.

The core loop of the game as it stands is to venture out onto one of the two available maps, gather resources you find out in the world (the biggest map is 1km square) and then head to an extraction point safely. Up to eight players can be on a map with you and if you encounter one it's up to you whether you kill them to take their loot or move on. If you die then everything you're carrying, including what you brought in with you in terms of items and weapons, is lost. So, picking a loadout you can live with is important. That's the essentials, but let's take a look at the rest.

"THE DAYZ DEVELOPER IS LEANING ON ITS LANDSCAPE AND SCAVENGING SKILLS OVER ITS FIGHTING PROWESS"



WONDERFUL WORLD

Say what you will about any other aspect of *Vigor*, but there's no question that Bohemia knows how to build a game world. The topography and density of foliage on some of the maps as well as the naturalistic layout of more heavily constructed towns is very impressive and offers some interesting and organic-feeling landscapes to use for cover in a shootout. Running through a forest can actually be really effective to avoid incoming fire.





RISK AND REWARD

■ Each stage has its risks and rewards for staying in the map for as long as possible. About eight to ten minutes in an airdrop will appear offering excellent loot and possibly blueprints for more gear. However everyone will know this and if you grab the drop your general location will be marked on the HUD for others to see. What's more the longer you stay the more likely you are to be caught in the radiation field that sweeps through and will ultimately kill you if you don't get to an extraction point.

COMBAT CONUNDRUM

■ The shooting in *Vigor*, at present, is probably the weakest aspect of the game. The feedback on weapons is pretty poor and the sense of getting hits or making any impact on your adversary is negligible. In tight locations this can become a bit laughable as you struggle to get a clean hit even with melee. Animation generally is also not great with some of the traversal looking particularly weak, but this is ultimately still in its preview stages and hopefully will improve.

IN BRIEF

In an alternate history nuclear war has devastated central Europe the survivors are heading to save zones like Norway. Can you thrive and survive?

BUILD A BASE

■ Every player in *Vigor* starts with a rather lovely and palatial shack on the edge of a lake (this image is of a church, though, so not this) as their base of operations. This base is completely safe from attack and is your hub area for crafting items, selecting your loadout and practising with new guns without fear of wasting ammo. This safehouse can also be upgraded for speedier crafting times and more complex items take real time to be finished.

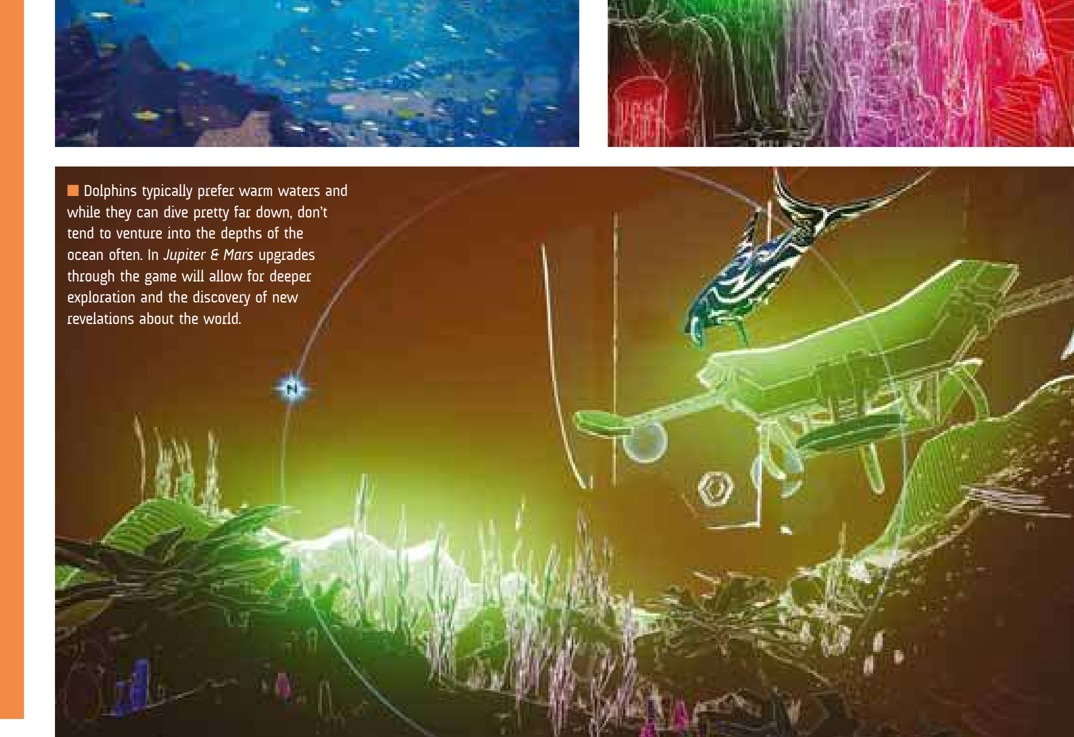
IN BRIEF
Search the depths of a post-human seascape as a dolphin and uncover the mysteries of the deep in a neon, VR world

INFLUENCES NEW AND OLD

→ How Tigertron is building on the past

Jupiter & Mars calls upon an interesting selection of influences and touchstones according to creative director James Mielke. "The inspirations that I had when I was designing this game were games like *Panzer Dragoon II Zwei* and *Super Metroid*," he says. "Most people expect me to say *Ecco The Dolphin*, but that was absolutely not a real factor for me. I was aware that people were going to mention *Ecco The Dolphin* because there are not too many games with dolphins in them."

Additionally Mielke was able to call on the advice of *The Last Guardian* creator Fumito Ueda about how best to approach creating a game with an AI companion, in this instance your dolphin partner Mars. "We asked Ueda-san for advice and he said something interesting. He said 'You should not make your AI partner too smart'. Because if your partner is too smart then he's just the win button and he'll do everything for you." And so Jupiter and Mars need to work together in order to progress even if you only have direct control over the former.



■ Dolphins typically prefer warm waters and while they can dive pretty far down, don't tend to venture into the depths of the ocean often. In *Jupiter & Mars* upgrades through the game will allow for deeper exploration and the discovery of new revelations about the world.

SPECTACLE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM COMBINE IN JUPITER & MARS

→ JAMES MIELKE TELLS US ABOUT HIS FIRST PROJECT AND NEW STUDIO

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **TIGERTRON, INC.** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

There's a burgeoning style of game that we're increasingly being drawn to, one that promotes immersion and atmosphere over mechanics and wants to open minds more than challenge fingers. We've been referring to them as Sunday afternoon games and *Jupiter & Mars* is looking like a wonderful example of the form.

"One of the things I set out to do when we started designing this game is that we wanted to accommodate a variety of players," creative director James Mielke tells us. "I would say that it's easy to swim around and sort of explore and look around, but it's also designed so that if you want to be the speed-run guy or you're just interested in the story and seeing what happens, you can also power through it and stay on the critical path. We do recognise that there are going to be a lot of players who probably just dive in for that relaxing, zen element to it."

You may remember Mielke from previous appearances in games™ from back in his Q Entertainment days working on *Child Of Eden*, *Lumines: Electronic Symphony* and the *PixelJunk* series or perhaps even as a former columnist in these very pages with his Kongetsu pieces. Either way, Mielke's latest combines a lot of his game-producing experience as well as is personal passions. You play as Jupiter, a dolphin in the expanded oceans of a future Earth where humanity has been lost in the course of a catastrophic global warming event. You are accompanied by Mars, your companion dolphin and AI controlled counterpart through the game. Playable in both VR and as a straightforward first-person explorer, *Jupiter & Mars* brings the ocean to life with iridescent light and wildlife.

> "YOU NEED TO USE ECHO EVERYWHERE IN ORDER TO BEAT THE GAME. IT'S JUST AS INTEGRAL TO JUPITER & MARS AS JUMPING IS IN MARIO"
> JAMES MIELKE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR

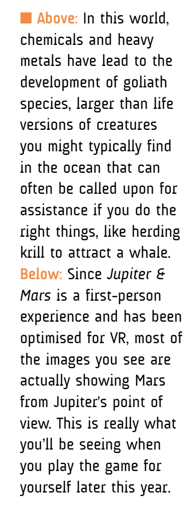
"As Jupiter you use echo location, you're basically the inquisitive, intelligent, thinking dolphin," explains Mielke. "You're using echo location to light up the area to see what's interactive in the environment based on the way things outline. When you see something that's interactive you press the appropriate button and then Mars will ram a barrier to open a path for you to swim through or he might ram a treasure shell that will contain some kind of artefact from mankind's past to add to your collection."

A key point for Mielke, however, was that the dolphins shouldn't be behaving in a way too far removed from things dolphins can really do (otherwise you might as well be playing as a human being). Echo location is similar to pinging a detective mode in other games, except this brings the world around you to life in an amazing way. "We certainly want people to enjoy that because that's the number one, most important mechanic of the game," he tells us. "You need to use echo everywhere in order to beat the game. It basically lights up all of the clues, all the interactive things in the environment. It's just as integral to *Jupiter & Mars* as jumping is in *Mario*."

Mielke's own interest in dolphins and the environment have also been a driving force behind not only this new game, but this new chapter in his career. "I've been a scuba diver since I was 15-years old and that's about 33 years ago. I wouldn't say that my interest in dolphins has been academic this entire time. I've certainly educated myself a lot more since beginning work on the concept of this game." That started a little after watching the award-winning documentary *The Cove* and its heartbreaking depiction of the threats dolphins face from hunting.

"Watching that documentary, I was in tears because I was terrified," Mielke reveals. "This is not the world I want to leave behind for my kids. So, that's why we formed Tigertron in the first place because it was either that or leave gaming entirely and we felt we had a better opportunity to show or to raise awareness by sharing this kind of world with gamers."

But the game won't be hitting you around the head with its ecological messages, Mielke insists. "We try to make an entertaining game first and foremost, but we also partnered with organisations like Sea Legacy or the Ocean Foundation to imbed their message into our game so that people have at least a little bit of a gateway of, 'Hey, I just played by this game. I'm deeply affected by it. I would like to know a little bit more', and it's already in the game." The concept is looking very exciting and the promise in VR is immense.





Above: In this world, chemicals and heavy metals have lead to the development of goliath species, larger than life versions of creatures you might typically find in the ocean that can often be called upon for assistance if you do the right things, like herding krill to attract a whale. **Below:** Since *Jupiter & Mars* is a first-person experience and has been optimised for VR, most of the images you see are actually showing Mars from Jupiter's point of view. This is really what you'll be seeing when you play the game for yourself later this year.

GRIS BRINGS GENUINE ARTISTIC PROWESS TO THE PLATFORMER

→ STYLE, SUBSTANCE AND A WHOLE LOT MORE IN-BETWEEN

FORMAT: **SWITCH, PC** | PUBLISHER: **DEVOLVER DIGITAL**
DEVELOPER: **NOMADA STUDIO** | RELEASE: **DEC 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

As talented as the world of game developers most certainly is, we can't think of many who have seen their art displayed in museums across the world, but that's something Nomada Studio can boast thanks to its creative director Conrad Roset. Apparently his introduction to the world of game-making was a chance meeting with his studio co-founders Adrián Cuevas and Roger Mendoza in Barcelona that turned to a discussion of translating his signature, elegant and often watercolour-infused style into a videogame. The end result of that conversation some three years later is *Gris*.

The game itself is a classic platformer in many ways, drawing on the elegance of Roset's art while also pulling from the likes of *Journey* and perhaps to some extent *Limbo* to give the game a sense of flow, place and mystery. The Nomada team isn't giving too much away about its lead character beyond saying she's getting over some things, so we're left to interpret what's happening from the disjointed and dreamy world around her. The bottom line though is this is an absolutely gorgeously animated and designed world that we absolutely have to see more of in the coming weeks before launch.





CLOAK ACTION

One of *Gris*' biggest nods to Journey is the cloak worn by its lead character, which billows and pulsates in a very similar fashion to that seen in thatgamecompany's great release. Since the character can sometimes be quite small on screen, the cloak is the expressive part of her presence, giving you a great sense of the environment she's in and what she's experiencing at any given time.





"WE'RE LEFT TO INTERPRET WHAT'S HAPPENING FROM THE DISJOINTED AND DREAMY WORLD"

EASY LISTENING

While there's certainly an element of puzzle platforming involved in what we've seen of *Gris* thus far and that may become more complex deeper into the story, the overall feel of the game is quite leisurely, allowing you to take in the game world and appreciate every corner of it. The score we've heard so far, building on the ethereal visuals with a similarly airy soundscape, complements this very nicely.

IN BRIEF

A sweeping, languid platformer that brings the art of creative director Conrad Roset to glorious life

EBB AND FLOW

We often say that still images of a game don't do it justice, but actually the fluidity and movement of *Gris* is rather nicely captured by these stills, perhaps because the movement and animation itself is based on the still art of its creative director. It's all embellishing that base design, but suffice to say, the world feels like it's inhaling and exhaling with each movement and change to the level.





WHY I ♥...

SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

JON BLOCH
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, 4A GAMES

You know, picking just one *game that I love is a hard question to answer. I don't know, it's hard! Okay – and obviously we haven't had one of these in a while – but I really enjoyed the* Splinter Cell *series. Personally, I love its approach to stealth action gameplay.* Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, for me, also had a lot of similar approaches to immersion in story that we are trying to achieve in* Metro Exodus*. That's something about those games that I've always loved… that slow burn pace, you know? I like the pacing that you find in a* Splinter Cell *game, and how you can just lose yourself in the environment. That's the style of game that I really, really like.*



"I like how you can just lose yourself in the environment"

JON BLOCH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, 4A GAMES

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

We visit 4A Games Malta to get an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at the development of Metro Exodus, one of the most ambitious first-person shooters of the generation. Join us as we delve into the decisions behind Metro Exodus' expanded design, speak with the talented team working to bring it to life and get our hands on a brand new area

The only time that you run out of chances is when you stop taking them.

After a lifetime spent struggling to survive in the claustrophobic tunnels of Moscow's Metro system, Artyom is only too aware that he is running out of chances to grasp a hold of. For the sake of his family, his friends and their future, he must lead an exodus out of the irradiated city he has always called home and head off to the East in search of a better tomorrow. Artyom is venturing out into the wastelands of the wider world to find life beyond the decay – he'll die trying to prove it. This is an exodus of necessity; a last chance with no clear conclusion.

It's easy to draw a parallel between Artyom's mission and the journey that developer 4A Games has embarked on to make it all possible. You might not realise it yet, but departures are a part of the studio's past, its culture and its identity. This is a studio that is proud of its past and excited by its expanding culture, although we get the sense that it is concerned about its identity. This is especially pertinent as the two core teams – based out of Malta and Kiev – work tirelessly to wrap up development on a creative endeavour that isn't just ambitious by its own lofty standards, but by any standard imaginable.

After five years of development, this will ultimately represent a bold new beginning for Artyom, for the developers that fled a country in crisis and for a studio looking to rise above a spectre of expectation that is threatening to consume it. »











This is a behind-the-scenes look at the development of *Metro Exodus*, a project that no other modern studio would ever have entertained, let alone pushed into active production.

LONG WAY FROM HOME

Artyom is a long way from home. 5,722 kilometres outside of Moscow at this stage of the game; it's clearly been a treacherous journey, one that has already driven Artyom and his caravan of followers through hell on earth in winter, spring and summer variations. Aboard the Aurora, a train hijacked from Moscow, the last of the Spartan Rangers have moved carefully across the country, recruiting new followers to their cause and gathering new information on what lies ahead of them as the seasons shift around them. Each of the areas preceding the one that we stand in today has presented a refreshing change of pace and challenge to those that were found in the depths of Moscow's Metro, though perhaps none more so than this one.

There is something about these new surroundings that doesn't sit right at first. The unease is palpable, the autumn air suffocating. We are now strangers in a strange land, and there's no telling how long it will take to adjust to the serenity. When all you have ever known has been cast under the long shadow of perpetual nuclear winter – when your life has been confined to an underground network of tunnels illuminated by flickering service lights – the absence of any immediate, obvious danger is arresting. It's disconcerting to stand by, idly observing the world, drenched in rays of warm light, watching as amber leaves dance gently in the breeze towards some distant horizon. The open road is beckoning us onwards, dirt paths through nearby trees taunt us to direct our attention elsewhere. There is no clear way ahead; the freedom is intoxicating.

The weight of the unknown is something that Artyom must carry on his shoulders and it's one we sympathise with wholeheartedly, particularly as we are given the opportunity to play through this brand-new area of Exodus, tentatively entitled The Valley. Admittedly, much like Artyom, we are feeling a little far removed from our comfort zone. This isn't your traditional Metro game by any stretch of the imagination.

Truth be told, while this change in pace and level design is initially a little jarring, it's one that we are ultimately elated to see 4A push towards. The studio feels much the same way. "We knew we wanted to do something new, as studios usually do when they set out to make a new game," executive producer Jon Bloch tells us, explaining how after a decade spent exploring dank subterranean environments the small development outfit finally felt the urge to surface for air. "Our designers wanted to branch out and flex their muscles. They wanted to do something different this time and the artists felt the same way."

Something different, but not necessarily unfamiliar; 4A is attempting to strike a careful balance here, one that benefits from the size and scope offered by an open-world sandbox shooter without diluting the power to be found in carefully authored, story-driven content. That isn't easy to accomplish. In many respects, those two goals are the antithesis of one another. Maybe now you're beginning to understand why *Exodus* has been in development for such a very long time.

4A may have always been associated with the Metro franchise, though the heart of the team has experience outside of it. It was an element of expertise that the studio was eager to take advantage of. "There is some open-world experience on this team, from back before 4A formed – from the days of GSC," Bloch continues, referring to the team's work on 2007's *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl*, a project where many of the core Metro developers would first meet and collaborate. "We figured that this was a good place for us to start. That we could kind of blend the two game experiences – S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Metro – together and try to find some interesting way of expanding on what we already had. It took us a while to get here, nearly two-and-a-half years to find the right formula."

The version of *Metro Exodus* that you see today has been overhauled extensively throughout its development. 4A Games



A lot has changed in *Metro Exodus*, but the fundamentals are still there. It's still a story-driven adventure that looks to cultivate terror through its environments, offering a narrative dripping in moral ambiguity and the supernatural.

"WE ARE NOW STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND, AND THERE'S NO TELLING HOW LONG IT WILL TAKE TO ADJUST TO THE SERENITY"

knew that it wanted to push the envelope without diluting the core appeal of the series' traditional play. This process looks bold and progressive now, though that wasn't the case back at the outset of development. "When we first started we made a completely open level and we went completely in the wrong direction with it," admits Bloch, explaining that any original intention to transition Metro's considered action into a fully open world space would have to be quickly reigned in. It couldn't capture the atmosphere and pacing that the Metro games have become so famous for cultivating. "We had to reel it back in… we had to go back in the other direction and see where the line was. Then we found ourselves removing too much of that open feel. It was a back and forth for so long, of us just iterating to try to figure out the right balance."

"At the end of the day, I think if we had gone completely open world that maybe there's some formula that we could've found, eventually. But I certainly think that it would've been a larger shock to the system, for ourselves, and for our fans," says Bloch. "With the formula that we have now, we found a way to contain a story arc and progression through these big open areas that is very well defined."

The Valley is a shining example of the compromise struck between design ideals. It's an open-ended level bookended by more traditional, sometimes even claustrophobic, linear spaces. It's a smartly designed area that subtly steers you towards points of interest and objectives without rushing you, giving you the freedom to explore the wide-open mass of land while still drawing you into authored moments or terror. It's a smart blend that works to keep you on the edge of your seat at all times and it's all handled in a nice, subtle way. "It's not like we have a sign up on the screen that says go here, do this, fetch that," says Bloch, noting that the game itself is almost entirely free of a HUD, while elements such as the map and objective notes act as physical objects in the world that you must handle to observe. "We still try to integrate everything naturally… there is all sorts of stuff that you can just come across naturally and explore for yourself rather than just being told to, like, go fetch ten of those things. We didn't want to – and we don't do – that kind of stuff."

We were a little taken aback by just how large this space would prove to be – and that's something that The Valley and Volga, the level shown off back at E3 2018, have in common. Deep Silver's global head of brand management Huw Beynon clued us in to the size and, truth be told, it sounds a little staggering. "We're looking at a total playtime of both previous games combined. In terms of geographical footprint, as we have moved to these more open areas, we can fit pretty much the entirety of the first two games (in terms of footprint) into just one of our huge levels," he says, expanding on this thought in a more digestible fashion: "The last two games came in at about 12GB each, and we're struggling to fit *Exodus* onto a single Blu-ray. This is a massive step up for the studio."

We spent five hours crawling through The Valley finding every one of the notes and audiotapes that were strewn across it in an attempt to discern every single story detail. We fled from a field-of-view dwarfing mutated bear, hid from hungry wolves that left us quivering in fear – each of their night-sky-piercing screams sending shivers down the spine – and played a violent game of cat and mouse with a variety of highly intelligent forest-dwelling foes. We tore that level apart in search of every one of its secrets.

Truth be told, we thought we had seen everything it had to offer. Until, that is, a developer would later unshackle the camera from Artyom with a dev command key and give us a quick flyover of the rest of the map that lay beyond the boundaries of the vertical slice we were able to play. We weren't even a third of the way through it; it was staggering. And while we'd love to tell you what we saw beyond the cemetery gates of the dilapidated church where our session came to a close, we wouldn't want to spoil the surprise.

Suffice to say, however, it looked pretty damned impressive. Not that we should be so surprised, because that's exactly what *Exodus* is, damned impressive. That speaks to the love and care that has gone into these carefully crafted spaces, »

TAKE AIM

The rickety old weapons have always been one of our favourite aspects to the Metro games, and you'll be happy to learn that little has changed on that front. *Exodus* features some truly fantastic weapon systems; the guns handle well, the feedback is sharp and the customisation system continues to impress. Much like in previous games, progression is presented through the guns themselves rather than any skill trees or EXP.

Each of the weapons that you come across, be it through the course of the story or hidden out in the world, are made up of five components. You can switch out the scope, the barrel, the magazine, stock and an attachment on each; switching these around will affect the weight, handling and recoil. You can switch out these elements while you're out in the world should you find a place to take shelter, giving Artyom the time to pull his backpack off. It's here where you can make changes to your weapon attachments, craft simple items such as ammunition, Molotov cocktails and bandages, and strip weapon parts down to be later repurposed. Should you come across a safe house with a workbench you'll be able to use those parts to craft rare ammunition, better healing items and even new attachments for your weapons.

The weapons need to be constantly changed and updated, better helping you to adapt to any given situation that you might find yourself in – having a healthy stock of scopes is essential, particularly as ranges and weather conditions can differ greatly in any given combat scenario. All of this works to build a better sense of immersion and physicality in *Exodus* than we've seen in previous Metro games. It's intuitive and impressive, to say the least.

Enemy AI has been completely reworked. It's far more intelligent and versatile, pushing us harder than it ever had done before. You're going to need to utilise all of your skills, weapons and the environment to make it out of these scraps alive.

FAMILIAR FACES



ARTYOM

All Artyom has ever known is Moscow under the shroud of nuclear fallout. The protagonist of the series has lived his entire life in the Metro, only occasionally going to the surface if it is in service of risking his life to protect all that he knows. In the time following the conclusion of *Metro: Last Light*, Artyom has been heading topside with an old radio transceiver, attempting to establish some communication with the outside world. It's as he picks up a spike that he decides to leave the Metro behind and head off in search of a new beginning.



ANNA

In many ways, Anna is the driving force behind the story of *Exodus*. Artyom feels compelled to provide a better life for his family than the one he experienced and he's only too eager to help Anna dream of a better tomorrow. Of course, we wouldn't want anybody else watching our back; Anna is the best sniper the Metro has ever known, a perfect companion to the larger, open spaces.



MILLER

A cross-country mission into the unknown that will end in certain death? You couldn't drag Colonel Miller away from such an endeavour. Miller leads the expedition from the Aurora, a train the Spartan Rangers were able to hijack and use to cross Russia. Miller is determined to see this one through, and he's even got himself some new metal legs after the battle for D6.

to the feel of the weapons and the level of customisation you are granted over each of them, to the fact that no matter how large the spaces become they are always finding clever ways to funnel you to the next point of interest with a variety of audio and visual cues. It's impressive level construction melding with the gorgeous set design.

It's the kind of design you see in games that have gone through years of painstaking iteration and refinement, as Bloch is quick to confirm. "Iteration is really ingrained in our process here. Just because something sounds good on paper at the beginning doesn't necessarily mean it's gonna actually be fun at the end of the day. We prototype a lot – we put stuff into the game, we try it out and we test it. If it works, we keep it; if it doesn't, well, we're not afraid of scrapping an idea."

After spending more than a few hours with the game now – having played the Volga area earlier in the year too – we've been surprised at just how many of the original ideas from *2033* and *Last Light* have made the transition. Naturally, you'd expect some changes to core mechanics and systems to be found in an effort to create more functionality and fluidity across the larger spaces, but that's not necessarily a compromise 4A has had to make here. "In every case, we wanted to make sure that we weren't getting rid of any system that had been there in the past," says Bloch, noting that the only major change players should expect to find is to do with the economy system. Bullets were a currency in the civilisation established in the Metro system, although that certainly isn't universal to Russia. As you move across the country you'll encounter different functioning societies, and each one of them has its own way of living and surviving. "Otherwise, all the features that have always been there, that have always made Metro what it is, are in there. Some of them have been expanded in order to better work with the open environments – and the gameplay that comes along with that – while there are others we wanted to expand on, elements like the weapons system and customisation.

"*Exodus* is still a story-driven game. It still has a linear arc binding the entire experience together. But we wanted to figure out a way to do something that was respectful to what made the series what it is today and to what our fans know and expect, *and* still do something that is new, interesting and has new gameplay mechanics," says Bloch, eager to note that 4A has been careful to ensure that it has kept the spirit of Metro alive even while trying to merge some of the larger open-environment feel of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games where the team draws so much of its inspiration and history from. "We've been doing the same thing for so long now. When you're branching out and doing something different, especially when compared with what we've always been doing, even in areas where we have prior experience, of course there are going to be challenges that come along with that. I think that's why it has taken us a little while to figure out how we wanted to do this."

Trust us, it's been worth the wait.

NEW BEGINNINGS

It's taken 4A time to get *Exodus* to where it is today. In many respects, that road has been long and difficult. You might be familiar with the following aphorism, that 'new beginnings are often disguised as painful endings'. We pick up just a hint of that in the story of 4A and the construction of this labour of love, though there is something else there too, simmering just beneath the surface. While we may often resent change, it's so often at the heart of growth and expansion. New beginnings can lead to great new things – that's evident in the case of *Exodus* – even if the road to accomplishing them is paved with hardships.

We mentioned right at the outset of this feature that 4A Games is a company that is only too familiar with departures. The first, as you might have gathered by now, came as the founders of 4A led an exodus out of GSC, as S.T.A.L.K.E.R. continued to stumble through a famously tumultuous development cycle, and fought to establish their own independent studio back in 2004. The second migration would come a decade later as roughly 85 developers working out of 4A's Ukrainian headquarters packed up their belongings and fled 3,391 kilometres to Malta – an archipelago in the Mediterranean ocean with a population of fewer than 450,000 people – just two months after the annexation of the Crimea.

4A now operates out of two locations, with the Malta office working as the central headquarters while Kiev continues to chip away at the game out of the spotlight, maintaining patches of public radio silence depending on the condition of the country around it. Dean Sharpe, CEO of 4A Malta, recalls how important this move was for many of the team, the studio itself and for the development of *Metro Exodus*. 4A had always planned on opening a new office, long before the danger of being in Ukraine came to a head, in an effort to bring in new talent and energy to the company – the type of personnel you need in-house to build something of the scope of *Exodus*. This, Sharpe believes, would have been near impossible had the team opted to forgo establishing a second studio far from Ukraine.

"Nobody was speaking English there. So, unless you spoke Russian, you'd have to be completely insane like I was to go over and work there," laughs Sharpe, the Californian native that took up residence in the country for close to a decade, first working at GSC before later moving to work on the Metro series. "I just didn't believe most people were going to do that. And, because of the quality of the projects that we were working on, it isn't like we could just bring in some junior staff. We were bringing in people that are well-established in the industry, some will likely have kids and families… they are not going to just pick up and move to Ukraine. It just wasn't going to happen.

"That's when we started talking about the idea of creating another studio. So when everything happened in Ukraine we'd already been talking about it and I had already been looking [at locations]. That just kind of sped things up; it was like, 'okay, it »

"THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A FEAR SHARED INTERNALLY THAT METRO IS ONLY WHAT IT IS BECAUSE IT WAS CREATED IN UKRAINE"







seems like the right time to get something going'," says Sharpe. "I told the owners, 'if you guys want to do this I'll find a place. I'll set it up and I'll get everything going' and, at the time, I really didn't want to stay in Ukraine. It was my time to move on anyway."

Thankfully, for Sharpe and for 4A, the opportunity to move to Malta presented itself and the transition was put into motion. Looking back, it's clear that this was the right step for everybody involved. Still, there has always been a fear shared internally that Metro is only what it is because it was created in Ukraine. That its tone and its feel, the superstition and the dread that pervades through the entire experience, has only been made possible because of the culture that informed the people working behind the polygons. "We would talk about this before we even came to Malta, of whether the move would reflect in the game," Sharpe tells us. "Because I used to always say in interviews, back when we were in Ukraine, that the game could only be made there because we lived it every day.

"I don't really think that living here has changed the game," Sharpe maintains, even as we suggest that the decision to move seems at least coincidentally tied to the decision to take Metro in a more ambitious direction, with a story bound by hope rather than despair fuelling the cross-country journey. "I think what's changed the game, or a lot of the change that you see, is just a question of us trying to push the envelope and do something a little bit different. It's not necessarily because our views are getting any different. The core group still has all the same fundamental beliefs. Metro is still driven by all of the crazy superstitions and all of the luggage that goes with that. You know, there is this old saying, and I joke about this with my wife all the time; you can take the Ukrainian out of Ukraine, but you can't take the Ukraine out of the Ukrainian."

"4A GAMES IS A STUDIO WITH A CLEAR AMBITION TO BE CONSIDERED A FRONTRUNNER IN THE TRIPLE-A SPACE"

Many of you might be frustrated with the time it has taken for *Exodus* to move through development, it now delayed until February 2019, but hearing Sharpe recount the chaos involved with the move leads us to wonder whether we are lucky to be receiving this game at all. "When we first came out here I chartered a plane. It was an Airbus, it wasn't like a little jet – it was a full Airbus. And because we chartered it, we were basically able to bring whatever we wanted to," begins Sharpe, who excitedly recounts moving day as the workforce bundled into the plane with their families, personal belongings and work computers. "They had just opened the new wing of the Boryspil [International Airport] and so they actually put us in the old terminal that wasn't being used, so we literally had our own terminal. It was really freaking cool."

The set-up may have been cool to Sharpe, although when asked about the mood on that flight, he makes it sound a little uncomfortable. "Well, the funny thing is, you know, Ukrainians are not the most emotional people – unless you fill them full of booze or something," he says, laughing. "I mean, I was having a great time. I can tell you that. I was just kind of trying to play it off as… remember the movie *Con Air*? I'm like, '*Con Air* flight, we're taking off, man!' I even got the pilots to let me go on the mic and be like, 'This is your captain speaking; we'll level off at 35,000 feet and I'm going to go ahead and turn the seatbelt sign off.' I know I was having a good time." For the rest of the staff, Sharpe continues, it was a mixture of excitement and apprehension. "I can't speak for everybody else… but I was already living in another country without my family or my friends, so I'm sure it was bittersweet for people. Obviously it's exciting to go and see somewhere new, but it's also sad to be leaving your home, your friends and your family."

The weapons are still the star, with *Exodus* presenting the best feeling and versatile guns the studio has ever created. Progression runs deeply through these makeshift devices, giving you the freedom to better prepare and adjust to any given situation.

Sharpe struggles to remember the exact number of 4A employees that made the move as it was an Airbus that also included many families – a gigantic undertaking in retrospect. In fact, when you consider the hardships that went into making this all possible perhaps it's no surprise that everybody felt the desire to try something new with *Exodus*. Here's Sharpe again, recalling his days out in Malta trying to build some stability for a workforce, many of whom had never left Ukraine before this endeavour. "The hardest part was actually finding apartments for everybody. It was miserable, just horrible because we were supposed to be here in June [2013] and we didn't end up getting here until August. And August is the shutdown month in Malta – nobody freakin' works, nobody does anything. Not to mention the fact that we're trying to get all of these short-term apartments. I was at the point where I was trying to work out a deal with the government where we could put tents out by the airport because I just didn't have anything else that I could do…"

It didn't come to that, thankfully. Last-minute deals were put in place, Sharpe spent an entire day signing contracts and before long the plane was in the air – the team had its monitors and PCs set up in the new offices within 24 hours of landing. Sharpe cares deeply for his staff. The camaraderie is clear as we walk around the studio as developers hunker behind monitors, tweaking the designs of maps and individual mechanisms that make up the weapons. Honestly, it's such a contrast to what we had anticipated.

Back in 2013 former THQ president and Naughty Dog co-founder Jason Rubin was quick to pull the curtain back on the standards of the Kiev office, revealing at the time to *Gameindustry International*: "4A's staff sat on folding wedding chairs, literally elbow to elbow at card tables in what looks more like a packed grade school cafeteria than a development studio," he said, going on to explain that while he had attempted to get the team Aeron office chairs – something he considered to be a "fundamental human right in the west" – they wouldn't fit in the office space. Well, that, and they would have to be smuggled into Kiev, as did new dev-kits, high-end PCs and other basic equipment the studio required.

Much of this was corroborated at the time by Metro's long-time creative director Andrew Prokhorov, who would also go on to confirm that Rubin's claims such as "the budget of *Last Light* is less than some of its competitors spend on cutscenes" and "[*Last Light*] is built on a completely original and proprietary second-generation engine that competes with sequels that have stopped numbering themselves, with more engineers on their tech than 4A has on the entire project," were also true. When you consider stories such as these, it's a wonder how *Metro 2033* and *Last Light* ever got completed, let alone to such an excellent standard.

This is what we have always found so impressive and intriguing about the 4A Games story. It's a studio with a clear ambition to be considered a frontrunner in the triple-A space, despite the fact that its budgets and staff numbers are minuscule when compared to the likes of Activision, Bethesda, EA or Ubisoft-owned studios that act as its direct competition in the market. That's all part of what makes *Exodus* such an intoxicating proposition. That's why 4A continues to fight, pushing the envelope to the point that fan expectation threatens to swallow it whole. If *2033* and *Last Light* were forged in such challenging conditions, what can this team possibly achieve when it is unburdened of such problems?

RISING TO THE OCCASION

If ever there was a map to prove that 4A deserves to take command of the triple-A shooter space it's The Valley. As we would later discover, it was a prototype of this stage that was »



You can now move seamlessly in and out of stealth and all-out action. The game is designed to cater to both play styles. Although you'll have a decidedly easier time sneaking, ammo is still a big commodity across the wasteland.









DAY BECOMES NIGHT

While *Metro Exodus*' wide-open stages will indeed be bookended by subterranean sections, classic Metro-style enclosures, it's the big maps where the biggest innovations reveal themselves. To better improve immersion *Exodus* will feature a fully dynamic day-and-night cycle, not only changing the visual aesthetic but changing AI behaviours too. "This allows you to approach situations differently depending on how you want to play. It changes how you strategise your approach to situations," teases executive producer John Bloch. "There is different weather depending on the seasons, and that will change the dynamic within the area."

We played through The Valley twice, using a rest point to turn the clock forward to dusk. It gave us the opportunity to approach the camps of enemies in entirely different ways, encountering different enemy behaviours as we did. It's here where all of our snooping in the map came in handy, a night-vision scope for a crossbow allowing us to dispatch enemies with ease and sow confusion and disorganisation between their ranks.

This will manifest itself in different ways depending on whether the enemies you are facing are human or mutants, not to mention the season that you find yourself caught up in. "You should expect different behaviours depending on the time of day; at night there's gonna be a lot more NPCs sleeping around camp fires or cuddled up in small areas, and during the day they might be out on patrol, so there might be fewer enemies in the camp… but you won't have the cover of darkness to sneak around, so it's a whole different stealth game in the daytime," says Bloch. The same thing goes with the mutants and creatures; they have very different behaviours and different numbers. All that kind of stuff is something that the player will need to be aware of if they want to strategise."

used to reveal *Exodus* at Microsoft's E3 conference in 2017. Much has changed since that breathtaking moment, but it's still pretty fun to think that it was this space that was used to introduce the world to so many elements that might (on the surface, at least) feel so foreign to the expected Metro experience.

There were two questions Bloch had for us as we wrapped up our time with *Exodus*; two elements that are clearly weighing on his mind as the release window moves into sight. He wanted to know if we had picked up on the beats of the story that had been scattered across the level like breadcrumbs and whether we felt at all threatened in the larger, less-confined spaces. In many respects, these are the two biggest challenges facing the team – 4A knows how to build fantastic feeling weapons, it knows how to stress an engine to get the best results, but can it bridge its storytelling, AI and combat into the wider spaces without diluting what it is that makes Metro, well, Metro.

"Each of the seasons brings its own challenge. [The Valley] had its own visual challenges," Bloch continues of the autumn set map. "We're introducing all of these bright landscapes, warm colours and pretty scenery, but how do you still make that dangerous? How do you still make that scary? How do you still make the player feel like they're not just running through a paradise right now?"

We get snippets of the ways 4A has grappled with this as we push through the forests and into smaller settlements, as we have our first encounters with the Children Of The Forest – kids that were stranded at a summer camp as the bombs dropped, taught to build a functioning society in the trees by a well-meaning teacher clearly in over his head. It's fascinating to see how their tale has been woven together indirectly through the game world. It's picked up through audio books and notes, heard in whispers as you stalk through the long grass around enemy scouts talking among themselves. It's an effective means of environmental storytelling, letting the history and temperament of a civilisation come to the fore before you wade into conflict.

"It's one of the things that we really wanted to take advantage of this time around, to be able to show all of these different kinds of places and cultures around the regions of Russia," says Bloch. "You encounter completely different societies and different groups of people that have established themselves in different ways and for different reasons. And in this case, where it was obviously a group of kids with their teacher, how did they then turn into adults without any other influences? Without the internet, without any other adults around… how do they grow up to be a functioning society?"

The answer, as you may probably expect, is poorly. The Children Of The Forest have splintered off into two factions, the Pirates and the Pioneers, each taking vastly different approaches to deal with outsiders such as bandits hell-bent on stealing their resources, and members of Artyom's crew, who have stumbled into yet another bad situation. And yet, it's easy to empathise with the Children Of The Forest. There's some degree of moral ambiguity to their actions – that's something that helps ratchet up tension in a way that we hadn't perhaps expected or anticipated. To them, you are the enemy here; a stranger in full military gear wading through the shadows and indiscriminately taking lives long after being warned to stay away.

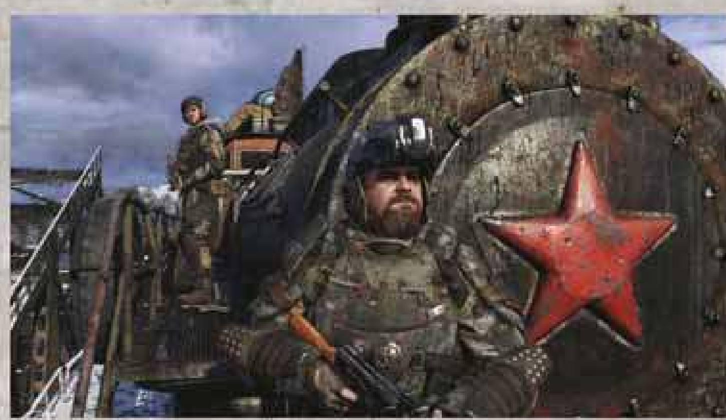
How you tackle the area is up to you. 4A has seamlessly blurred the lines between stealth and all-out action sections, using the breadth of the open-world design to give you an array of options in combat and a completely overhauled AI system to better account for your decisions. The game flow is excellent, though some will undoubtedly miss the more authored pacing of old. For us, we couldn't help but be impressed by the flexibility of the enemy behaviours; they move in packs, they flank and they take cover, so far so standard. What left us reeling was the





Exodus is told across four seasons as Artyom and a small crew of Spartan Rangers leave Moscow behind and head East in search of a world unburdened by nuclear fallout. Something tells us that is easier said than done.





Artyom and his crew will move across Russia aboard the Aurora, an old train the team was able to take command of. 4A has teased that the train will play an integral part in the game, operating as a forward command post and evolving over the course of the journey as you gain new followers and resources.

addition of AI barks; enemies calling out to one another, sharing information between one another on our location and using it to coordinate. It helps to add a degree of authenticity to the world in an area 4A has never had it.

"It's not just the designers and the artists that get to do new stuff this time around, so we've looked at all of our other systems and our AI is definitely one of them," Bloch tells us, noting that the team has taken heed of criticism it has faced in the past as it looked to rework such major systems. "We realised that our AI systems were really, really complex and really very realistic. Players didn't necessarily understand what was happening all of the time, and when you don't understand what the AI knows or why the AI is doing something it makes it hard to fully grasp what's going on, and then it might seem like the system is broken or buggy."

Bloch laughs that it is indeed "possible" that it was broken or buggy in instances back in *2033* and *Last Light*, but this time around the team isn't taking any chances. It's making the AI and battle chatter clearer to understand, though no less threatening. "Communication was one of the things that we wanted to work at this time. You might get into combat and you'll overhear the enemies shouting that you're up on the balcony or hiding behind the car, behind barrels… we've added so much specific dialogue," says Bloch, noting that this works two-fold. Not only does it help sell the authenticity of the world and of the people that inhabit it, but it's also designed to help players keep track of the packs of enemies. *Exodus* isn't easy by any stretch of the imagination, and this system is integral in allowing you to "move positions, change your strategy and adapt to the enemies."

If you should ever manage to get the upper hand, wiping out the majority of a crew, you'll find that the remaining few will attempt to surrender – giving you the opportunity to either kill them outright, walk away or knock them out. 4A isn't overly forthcoming into how this system will, if at all, factor into any of the decisions that will no doubt rear their head later into the game, though it does help paint a degree of moral ambiguity across the world and its populous – something the Metro games have always toyed with.

"It's a behavioural change," teases Bloch, who also notes that there are other such systems hidden in the game. Another working alongside the survival mechanic is that of the adrenaline system, which increases the amount of punishment an enemy takes before hitting the dirt the longer they spend in combat. "We've tried to identify where the weaknesses were in all of our systems, AI included, and have tried to improve them as much as possible."

That's 4A Games' approach to every aspect of *Metro Exodus*. If it's an element returning from a previous game, the team has tried to improve it as much as possible. If it's a brand-new feature, mechanic or system, then the team is pushing for it to be on a level above that of any of its competition. 4A might be small, but it dares to dream big. And it deserves to; from its humble origins, its move to establish a new base far from home, to its decision to rip Artyom out of his home and take him on his most challenging adventure yet, everything about *Exodus* (and the story behind it) is demanding of your attention and admiration.

It might not look like the Metro you're familiar with, but there's a very real chance that *Exodus* will surpass the achievements of its predecessor. The larger levels may steal the attention, but it's the stories within them that will ultimately prove whether this has been a journey worth taking for 4A. Still, it's very confident that it's made the right decision, that *Exodus* will bring us into Artyom's world better than any game before it. "One thing that we've always tried to do with the Metro games is that we want players to feel immersed. We want players to feel like they are Artyom, that they are defining who he is based on their actions. We try to be very careful about how we present certain things in the story and we want players to feel like they're actually defining who this main character is, you're not just along for the ride," says Bloch. We ponder whether Artyom will ever find the salvation that he seeks, whether he deserves happiness after struggling in the shadows for so many years. Bloch added this with a smile: "The last time Prof [creative director, Andrew Prokhorov] was asked about this I think he said, 'In *Metro Exodus*, you will get what you deserve.'" We have a feeling the same will be said about 4A Games when all is said and done.



Mutants and creatures are still a huge part of the Metro experience. As you move further out from Moscow you'll begin to see the fallout affecting the mutants and the environments in different ways, though you should still expect to encounter weird anomalies.

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Everything you need to know about

TOTAL WAR THREE KINGDOMS

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Discover one of the longest-running strategy series in the industry

If you own a PC you should probably be playing Total War. It's as simple as that; it doesn't matter whether you're a history buff looking to take command of some truly epic battles, or an inquisitive player eager to watch thousands of little soldiers smash into thousands of other little soldiers until your graphics card shatters into pieces. Total War is a strategy series that offers something for everybody; that's in spite of how imposing or complicated it may at first seem.

Listen, we get it. This is a niche genre, one that requires more investment than your typical action-adventure, FPS or RPG. Maybe you caught a Let's Play on Twitch and became immeasurably terrified by the speed in which the game plays, and the way in which some players can orchestrate complex manoeuvres with thousands of troops under their command in seconds. Perhaps you tried a Total War at a friend's house one time only to switch it off minutes later as they erupted into fits of laughter, teasing you because you dared to pull the difficulty down to easy – some wounds never heal. And hey, maybe you watched a trailer and the scale of the campaign map and the size of the armies scared the living bejesus out of you. Look, everybody has their reasons for approaching the genre with caution, but we're here to tell you that if you've ever had even a passing interest in Total War that this is going to be the game to finally try it.

Three Kingdoms takes place in a fascinating period of history; it's a story bound by love and loss, driven by heroes and villains, resulting in some of the bloodiest conflicts known to humanity. Creative Assembly is leveraging all of this to build its latest and the results are certainly impressive. With a renewed focus on characters as a way of building tension and a more immersive campaign experience, we honestly believe that *Three Kingdoms* will be the perfect refresher after the fantasy excursions of Total War: Warhammer and spin-off sagas found in *Britannia*. This is a Total War experience that's going to surprise veteran players, though it's also going to be accessible enough that new players will find entertainment. That's a difficult line to walk and that's why we've had game designer Leif Burrows and writer Pete Stewart join us after a recent hands-on session to help walk you through everything you need to know about *Total War: Three Kingdoms.* »

1

IT'S A LONG TIME COMING

It's already been five long years since the release of *Total War: Rome II*. If you too have been eager to see Creative Assembly return to its historical roots after so many years of dealing in fantasy, then you'll want to pay attention to *Total War: Three Kingdoms*. The studio is breaking new ground here, ushering in huge revisions to its classic formula, drawing from its recent experiments and rich legacy in the genre to deliver a Total War that feels fresh and emboldened to usher in sweeping change. *Three Kingdoms* is pushing the series in a new direction, taking bold strides to deliver a Total War game that could quite easily surpass what we believed it was capable of.





2

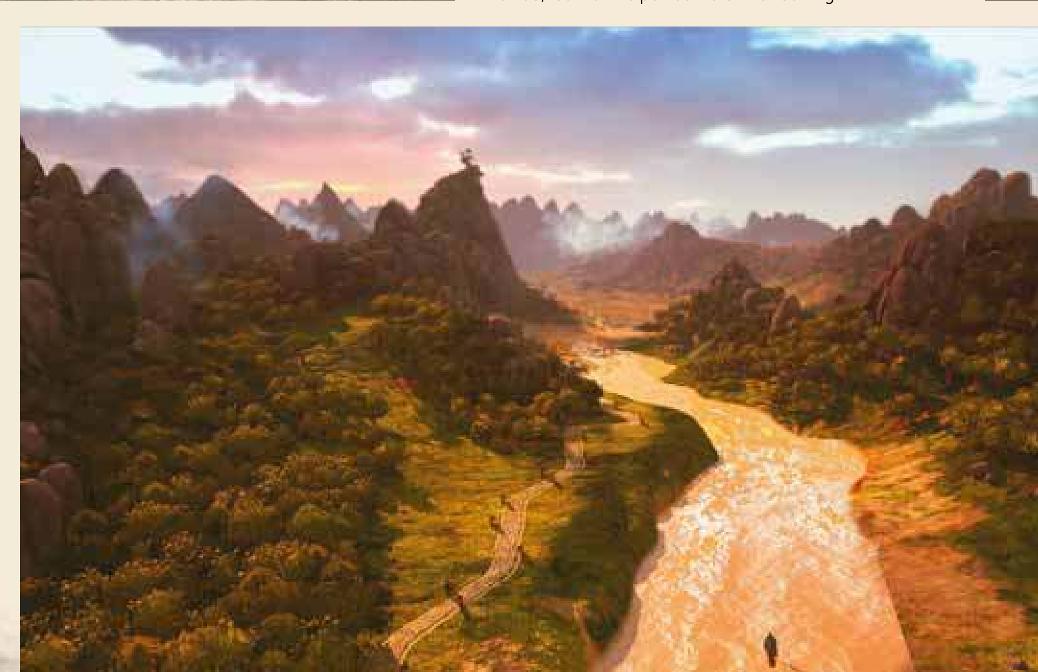
A FIRST FOR THE SERIES

Three Kingdoms is the first Total War game to be set in China, with the tactical action framed around what Creative Assembly describes as, "one of the most turbulent times in Chinese history." It's difficult to believe that it has taken this long for the studio to get here; China is unquestionably one of the most requested locations for the studio to settle on, offering an aesthetically diverse array of battlegrounds, a roster of rich, historical characters to become acquainted with, and a host of well-storied conflicts that can be easily leveraged for Total War's typically large-scale battles. It is, as lead writer Pete Stewart tell us, "sort of the perfect Total War setting."

3

WHAT'S IN A LOCATION?

Three Kingdoms picks up in 190 CE, just as the notorious Han Dynasty is on the verge of collapse. Game designer Leif Burrows describes it to us as a "very exciting period in history, where this long-lasting dynasty of almost 400 years is crumbling. And then, in the ashes of it, you basically have all of these new warlords emerging," he says, teasing the 11 different characters we will have the opportunity to take command of across the campaign and in multiplayer. "It just made for a perfect sort of battleground for a Total War game." In the *Three Kingdoms* campaign we will have the opportunity to fill the void of power quickly emerging, forged in the fires of conquest as other powerful warlords plan their own ascent to regional dominance.





"In a way, this is the first Total War title that is focused on very strong characters"

4 DRAWING FROM A MIXTURE OF SOURCES

It might, on the surface, feel as if Creative Assembly is asking for trouble with *Three Kingdoms*, its story taking influence from both historical record and a work of fiction to inform its action. But Burrows maintains that this actually gives the studio the flexibility to deliver a truly epic Total War game. "We have these two amazing sources to draw from. We have the historical account, which is very factual, and then we have *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms*, the novel where all of these personal stories of bravado, revenge and friendship are all tied together into a nice narrative. It's not like *Three Kingdoms* is pure fiction, it's historical fiction and we certainly spent a lot of time making sure that anything from the novel is presented authentically," says Burrows, with Stewart adding: "The novel mostly follows the facts, it just kind of embellishes them in a nice romantic way."

5 IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

The focus is wholeheartedly on character as a driving force for the action. The large-scale, real-time combat and turn-based tactical strategy that the series is famed for is still in place, but now all of that is driven through unique personalities and the relationships that they force along the way. It's been a challenge for Creative Assembly to find the right balance between these elements. "In a way, this is the first Total War title that is focused on very strong characters. We've had previous titles, like *Attila* and *Napoleon* – that have taken on a character's defining moment in history – but *Three Kingdoms* is trying to bring multiple characters to life," Stewart considers. "This whole period isn't defined by one person; they are all competing to define it."

6 DRAWING FROM WARHAMMER

Much like in the fantasy games Creative Assembly has recently been working on, you'll be selecting just one character (and a handful of retinues) to play across the campaign rather than an entire faction. These legendary figures can die if you aren't careful too, with the dynasty passed down to an heir of your choosing. Burrows is also keen to note that any iterations made to the systems and engine through Warhammer's development will also be utilised here. "The main engine is developed in a modular way and each project, which basically takes the torch forward," he says, adding, "there's an exchange of ideas and expertise [between the teams]. We're looking at what Warhammer is doing, and building on those ideas."

7 SOCIAL DYNAMICS ARE ALWAYS AT PLAY

As you enter a battle you'll be able to bring up to three hero units with you. This doesn't just give you more options on the battlefield but will directly determine what types of units you'll be able to field. You will, however, need to be wary of the social dynamics at play; all of the hero units won't necessarily play nicely together and that can have consequences that spill out of the real-time battles and into the turn-based tactics across the campaign map. While it's impossible to know how Creative Assembly plans on balancing this system – whether it will throw up too many random elements to truly be satisfying – at this stage, though we do hope that it only serves to amp up the drama. »

8
THE RETURN OF UNIT FORMATIONS

Each of the generals that are available to you in *Three Kingdoms* are trained in the art of war and will bring their own specialities and tactical knowledge to your army. Creative Assembly is reflecting this in a very real way here, putting more work than ever into unit formations and glorious, glorious micro-management. Unlike the Total War: Warhammer games, unit formations are indeed returning to give an extra layer of tactical veracity to the gameplay, although these will need to be learned – passed down from the generals to the soldiers. The better you integrate the various hero characters into your army, then the better prepared for battle across the campaign they will soon become.

9
YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE CLASS

Each of the 11 characters available falls into one of five distinct character classes – Commander, Champion, Sentinel, Strategist and Vanguard. Each of these effectively offers a different playstyle and therefore a different way to tackle Total War. You'll need to utilise tactics that better suit your chosen general, keeping an eye out for unique items and mounts to make them even more powerful. Each commander has their own skill tree, letting you advance five active and five passive abilities to better shape their versatility in the field as you see fit. This will have a huge impact in the Romance campaign, where generals can be the difference between a win and a loss, though their power is mitigated in the traditional Historic campaign.

10
ROMANCE IS A NEW WAY TO PLAY

"You can't really tell the historical story of the period without the personal stories from the novel as well. The character relationships are important in both game modes, it's important to the historical background," Burrows tells us and – wait, two game modes? That's right, *Three Kingdoms* will feature two primary ways to play, Romance and Classical. Romance is where fact and fiction collide, as Creative Assembly looks to draw on the larger-than-life presence of the heroes that dominated the stories – their myth and legend shaping the way they impact the battlefield. "In Romance mode you get to know the characters," says Burrows. "They will have a big impact, whereas in Historical/Classic mode it's more grand-scale – the focus is on big armies and manoeuvring your forces."

11
YOU CAN STRIP IT BACK IF YOU WANT TO

It's worth noting that while a lot of the focus – particularly when it comes to the ways in which Creative Assembly demos the game – has been on the Romance mode, the studio is keen to stress that Classic mode is still the Total War game that you veteran players know and love. There's still a lot of time, care and attention going into this core way to play the game. If anything, it puts more attention and focus on some of the minutiae. For example, the artificial intelligence has been overhauled, requiring a clear attention to detail and sharp reactions to fend off encroaching armies; the engine can now render out thousands of authentically designed warriors onscreen at once and there's a day/night cycle that changes the composition of battles.



"You can't really tell the historical story of the period without the personal stories from the novel as well"



12

IT'S STILL THE TOTAL WAR YOU KNOW

In spite of all of these big sweeping changes to the core dynamic, Classic mode will still be the Total War you know and love. You won't be able to rattle through dozens of enemies at a time, nor will they be as impervious to damage from regular units as they are in the Romance offering – in fact, generals will come with bodyguards in the Classic configuration to better depict how these characters were treated at the time. We've been told that elements of *Three Kingdoms* such as random events, the appearance of certain characters and the implementation of broader elements from the *Romance Of The Three Kingdoms* novel won't appear in a Classic campaign. If you want your campaign to be pure, the option is certainly there for it.

13

CHARACTER IS STILL KEY IN HISTORICAL MODE

While you'll see characters effectively able to take on entire armies by themselves in Romance mode, the generals will be more tempered figures in the historical setup. That doesn't mean, however, that they are to be ignored entirely. In fact, managing the generals and dealing with their relationships, the drama and the betrayal that helped define that era of conflict is still going to be a huge appeal to the campaign. "These character relationships influence other game systems. They create a lot of interesting challenges and sort of spawn interesting decision-making that you will have to do," says Burrows. "It's less about juggling positives and negatives or doing spreadsheets of calculations, but rather about being a really strong leader."

14

YOU CAN DUEL OTHER HEROES TO THE DEATH

Given the mythical nature of these generals and the power they can have over the turn of battle in Romance mode, you'll be happy to know that there are ways to take rival generals out of play. It's a risky manoeuvre, putting your own hero at risk, but it can so often turn the entire tide of a battle. You can challenge a rival on the battlefield to a duel as the battle rages on around them. The two characters meet and immediately engage in a fight to the death that in our preview proved to be a real spectacle to watch in action. You'll also be able to activate abilities in the fight to try and help your hero out, though its win conditions are ultimately a blur of class, experience and morale; kill a hero's brother, for example, and you should expect to see them launch into a near-unstoppable grief-fuelled frenzy. Duelling is one of our favourite new battle mechanics. »







15 YOU CAN'T TRUST ANYBODY

This period of history came to be defined by bloodshed and betrayal. Total War has the former, with its ridiculous battles that pit tens of thousands of soldiers against one another in active combat. But it now has the latter too, introducing a system that allows you to implant operatives within enemy armies to bring them down from the inside – though the same can also happen to you too. "You've got to constantly wrestle with the idea that someone in your faction might be a spy," teases Stewart, who tells us that players will need to pay careful attention to who they are promoting in their ranks. "There's an element of difficulty and challenge in that system, especially as you keep progressing through the campaign. It's one of the big things to be excited about, it makes the characters feel like they are part of a world."

16 GREAT ENTRY POINT FOR NEW PLAYERS

Of all of the Total War games that have arrived in the last 18 years, there's an argument to be made that *Three Kingdoms* is going to perhaps be the best entry point for genre newcomers that the series has ever seen. That, we're told, is an intentional decision on Creative Assembly's part – it's concerned about how easily new players can become involved with the fun."I think often Total War is seen as this very strategic, half-historical simulation… but it is very much a personal game about characters – that's especially true of *Three Kingdoms*," muses Burrows, who notes that while a lot of work has been done to gradually introduce the systems and to scale the difficulty in a more effective manner, all of it is driven through those heroes.

"As much fun as the Total War games are and as great as they are, they can be large, multi-faceted beasts"

17

HOW THE DIFFICULTY SCALE WORKS

Creative Assembly knows that its games can look overly complex and imposing on the surface. It too is aware of how difficult they could be to play, particularly for new players. The focus this time around has been on reworking the opening hours of the campaign – especially in Romance mode – to better bring players of all experience into the fold. "With some of the older games we had this problem where the difficulty curve is biggest at the beginning," laughs Burrows, who acknowledges that this is akin to throwing you into a burning building before teaching you how to fight the fire. "For *Three Kingdoms* we tried to push more towards an experience where you start in an easier environment. We want you to get to the more difficult bits organically, without forcing you to sit through tutorials. It should be an organic experience."



18

EXPLORING THE FUN OF TOTAL WAR

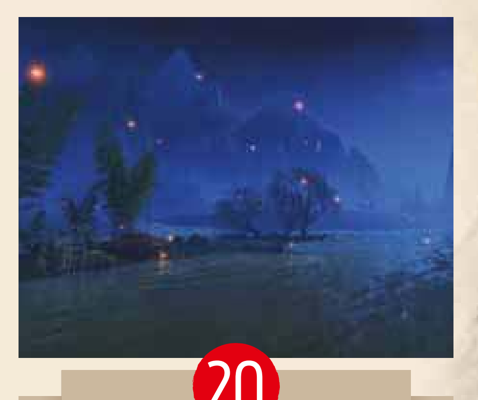
"This is something we keep exploring and looking into, because as much fun as the Total War games are and as great as they are, they can be large, multifaceted beasts," laughs Stewart, maintaining that if there were to be a good kind of beast, Total War would be it. But Stewart, a veteran of Creative Assembly, knows only too well what challenges the studio faces when trying to make the game more accessible to new players. That's something it is trying to change in *Three Kingdoms*. "What we have focused on is that when you first start playing, if you don't particularly have a lot of experience, is we wanna sort of help you to get used to the systems slowly, so by the time you're 20, 30 turns down the line, you'll actually understand what's happening in the game," he says, although we wonder aloud what a player should do if they are still struggling at that point… "Just turn the difficulty down, there's no shame in it," he laughs. "Put it on easy, no one cares.; no one's looking."



19

IT FEELS FANTASTIC

Whether you love the idea of this being such a character-driven game or are approaching it with caution, we're pretty sure that you're going to fall pretty hard for *Three Kingdoms*. The battles feel suitably epic – stressful and invigorating in equal measure. The refined control systems feel excellent, making it comfortable for us to direct large forces across the battlefield and quickly re-organise when it all goes horribly wrong. The art direction is unlike anything you've ever seen from the series, it's beautiful to behold. Creative Assembly isn't pulling any punches as it returns to the historical core of Total War. The wait to its Spring 2019 release date is going to be difficult to bear.



20

IT'S LEFT US EAGER FOR MORE

Getting hands-on with early preview codes can often be difficult to assess, particularly when its scope is limited. We haven't, for example, had the opportunity to sample the turn-based tactical side of play – manoeuvring our generals and army across the huge map in an attempt to gain dominance over China. But we can say that we're incredibly eager to. What we've had the opportunity to preview has left us impressed. Creative Assembly knows what it's doing, and it rarely makes a misstep when it comes to its core historical wing of the long-running series. But if the attention to detail we've been able to divine from the overlapping mechanics and systems is apparent and represented throughout the rest of the game, it's pretty clear that this is going to be one for the history books.



THE ULTRA-



Violence

ID SOFTWARE IS UNLEASHING HELL ON EARTH WITH THE FASTEST, DEADLIEST AND BLOODIEST DOOM GAME IT HAS EVER CREATED. WE SIT DOWN WITH THE STUDIO TO DISCOVER WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE DOOM ETERNAL

By id Software's own admission, there are three simple rules that must be adhered to for any Doom game to function in all of its gory glory. First, you need to face off against an army of really bad-ass demons. Second, it needs to let you wield big fucking guns. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, you need to be moving really, *really* quickly. It has always been this way, and it always will be.

Doom Eternal follows these rules to the letter. To the unassuming observer, it might even look like *Eternal* is little more than business as usual, although that assessment would do id a huge disservice. The studio has put together one hell of an impressive package here; Doom has always been an uncompromised celebration of videogames, of the medium's inherent fun and capacity to act as a shining beacon of pure entertainment. While the wider world may see Doom as a series defined by its violence, we instead see it for what it is: a creative endeavour that understands the rhythm and flow of the FPS genre perhaps better than any other. That's something we have found great comfort in over the last 25 years.

The series' ritualistic approach to demon slaying is one of the few constants to be found in this industry. We always know where we stand with Doom: up to our knees in demonic viscera, waiting for the adrenaline surge to subside, having the time of our goddamned lives. It has been that way ever since Doom first plastered the foundations of the first-person shooter across a pixelated approximation of Hell, and it was also true of the studio's wild reinvention of the formula in 2016.

The question of how id would possibly take the series to the next level – how it would begin to iterate upon one of the purest action experiences to arrive in the last decade – has been ever present on our minds. As it should happen, it was a fairly simple question for the studio to answer. With *Eternal*, id wants you to rip and tear through just about everything that you come into contact with. "That's literally where it all starts for us," laughs game director Marty Stratton, who asserts that the next chapter of id's flagship shooter is once again centred wholeheartedly on "killing bad-ass demons with big guns in unbelievable places."

The results of this thinking should be clear for all to see. *Eternal* has upped the ante in just about every respect, although that's largely because of the fantastic foundation it has had to build on. id has prioritised an overhaul of the core movement and traversal mechanics, a refinement of the control systems and stepped up the brutality to further emphasise the importance of the Glory Kills to combat flow – all of this in an effort to further fuel and distil what it is that makes Doom so irresistible.

Eternal is faster than any Doom that has come before it. The guns are larger and more powerful, and the Doom Slayer has also found himself in command of a suite of new abilities to help establish him as the strongest hero id has ever created. To compensate for your newfound strength, id is pumping twice as many enemies into its expanded combat arenas for you to attempt to eviscerate. That teetering line between power and fragility was an important balance for the studio to strike. "A hero is only as strong as the enemy that they defeat and »



if you want to feel like a badass you've got to wreck some amazing bad guys along the way," says creative director Hugo Martin. "And *Doom Eternal* has some incredible enemies. We want you to feel unleashed, like nothing is holding you back. This is a pure, unfiltered, action FPS experience."

He isn't kidding, either. id has been able to put together something that feels so uncompromising by accomplishing something that is, frankly, a little ridiculous: it has made *Doom* (2016) feel slow and ponderous by comparison. Yes, you read that right. And no, we can hardly believe it either. Our stomachs have only just about settled from the sense of inertia that the game so happily generated. *Eternal*, much like its predecessor, is an FPS with a flippant disregard for modern genre convention; the resulting experience is immediately intimidating, not to mention a little dizzying.

Martin insists that one of the biggest questions the team wrestled with when considering a sequel to *Doom* (2016) was "How do we make the player more aggressive? All of our answers have to speak back to that philosophy." When id cites increasing player aggression as a production value, it isn't merely to mitigate the increase in enemy volume or the improved authority that AI has over its spaces. Instead, it's born out of a desire to keep players moving. The faster that you can close the gap between your position and that of an enemy, the faster tension and drama will naturally arise in play.

Eternal encourages the generation of this drama in a number of subtle ways. For starters, the Doom Slayer now comes equipped with a slew of new movement and traversal abilities designed to complement the standard eight-weapon loadout. Some of these additions are small and situational, such as the capacity to perform a monkey bar swing off of objects in the environment and the ability to contextually climb walls to help gain a new perspective on the arenas. Other additions are designed to be cycled into the natural flow of play, such as the returning double jump and the addition of an omnidirectional dash manoeuvre that grants you a small burst of speed at a button press.

The dash is an interesting addition for a number of reasons. While Doom's action might feel totally unrestrained, if you were to peer behind the polygons you'll find that its design is actually full of it. The studio has been careful to ensure that every addition or change only serves to complement either the basic utility of weapons or to enhance your speed on the ground, all of this in an effort to get you utilising the space each of the multi-tiered combat arenas now grant you.

If there was ever any concern that the arrival of these new mechanics or systems might dilute the core appeal of Doom's unique rhythm, id is way ahead of you on that front. "[*Eternal*] will still feel like Doom, even after we have added in these new abilities," Martin assures us. "Being able to close the distance between enemies faster will make you feel more aggressive… and we are always encouraging the player to play more aggressively. When that's the underlying theme of a new mechanic or ability we know that it's going to work."

Were you to take an element such as the Dash, you'll find that there's more nuance to its use than the gameplay footage might initially suggest. While it does indeed provide excellent offensive and defensive opportunities – letting you swiftly dodge out of incoming attacks or rush within chainsaw range – it can't be used infinitely. Therein lies the minutiae; sure, you can dash twice in quick succession, but it will then need to regenerate – something that it will not do while you're in the air. Do you risk waiting on the ground for the dash to regen as enemies close in from all angles, or do you take to the air using traversal combos to reposition yourself and claim a moment of respite from the shower of bullets heading in your direction?

Eternal is full of these little decisions, and they are based purely on reaction – in the split-second between ripping the eye out of a Cacodemon and pumping plasma rounds into Mancubus. Dash – much like the refined weapons, modifications and the new Predator-style shoulder mounted launcher – is merely another part of your arsenal, another mechanic designed to help you maintain an unruly amount of momentum in an effort to unlock the true power and potential of Doom's combat loop. "It all comes down to us trying to define the things that we felt were missing or are the next evolution of. That's where something like the dash comes in," Stratton tells us. "In this particular case, it's like… well, where has this been all my life? It's such a natural component of Doom's movement now."

Why is this all so important? While you may believe that weapon handling and bullet ballistics are among the most important elements of any given Doom game, that isn't necessarily the case. We know that id Software designs *without question* the best-feeling shotguns in the videogame industry, but that isn't why its games are so excellent. Its games are so excellent because of the way that you move. It's because of the momentum that you are able to generate in an instant, and of the control that you are granted over your weapons, even as you are moving at what feels like 200 miles per hour.

Eternal builds off of *Doom* (2016) in this respect, further expanding on the excellent level design and rhythm to combat cultivated within those spaces. *Doom* (2016) presented its combat arenas as tightly constructed three-dimensional puzzles, each of them offering »

■ In *Doom Eternal* you should have your gun angled towards an enemy at all times. That's why equipment has been moved to a Predator-style shoulder mounted device. It doubles up as a flamethrower and a grenade launcher.



You should expect to see a few fan-favourite weapons and enemies returning, although each has been updated to better take advantage of the improved AI and widened combat spaces.

> "Eternal is faster than any Doom that has come before it. The guns are larger and more powerful, and the Doom Slayer has also found himself in command of a suite of new abilities"

WHAT'S IN A LOCATION?

In a fun little nod to 1994's *Doom II*, Hell will once again be descending upon Earth. It's awesome to see; the familiar architecture with pentagrams burned into their framework, the sky a blood red, embers raining down upon the demon-littered streets. Earth provides a welcomed change of pace to the combat areas seen in 2016's *Doom*, though it won't be the only location we pay a visit. id has revealed that we will also be investigating (well, riddling with bullet holes and demon corpses) new areas of Hell, returning to the UAC facility on Phobos, and even visiting some locations that we've never been to before in a Doom game – that have only been referred to in a whisper through the Slayer's Testament. Our money is on id taking us to its version of Heaven, which, to be perfectly honest, we can't wait to burn to the ground. *Eternal* is all about establishing a wider world outside of the core action.

Doom Eternal will be the first game to take advantage of id Software's all-new id Tech 7 engine. It's going to ensure that this is the best-looking Doom ever made, and all at a smooth 60 frames per second.

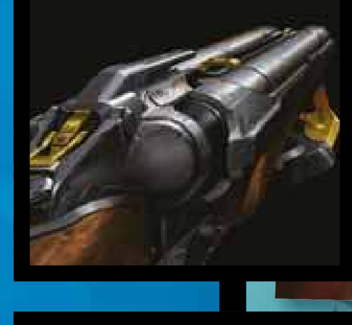


THE WEAPONS OF DOOM ETERNAL

JUST A HANDFUL OF THE UNIQUE AND POWERFUL TOOLS YOU'LL BE USING TO KILL THE BIGGEST AND BADDEST DEMONS

SUPER SHOTGUN

The Super Shotgun returns from *Doom* (2016), although it has had a pretty huge upgrade and update. It now features an under-slung grappling device, the Meat Hook, designed to let you grapple between enemies and quickly traverse huge distances. This weapon has completely changed the composition of Doom's core combat loop.



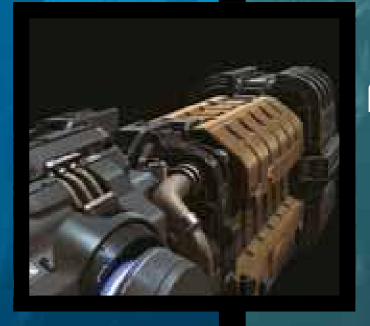
BALLISTA

This is a brand new weapon designed for *Doom Eternal*, potentially replacing the Gauss Cannon. The Ballista launches kinetic projectiles with precision, though it can also be used to unleash powerful charged shots that will literally rip demons apart. We can't wait to see what mods are made available for this one.



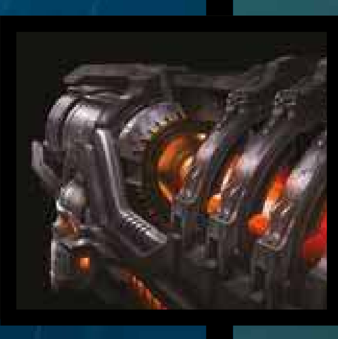
PLASMA RIFLE

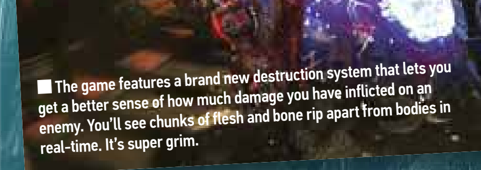
Many of you will likely remember the Plasma Rifle from *Doom* (2016). Little has changed since then, with the weapon still carrying a more futuristic aesthetic than the Plasma gun found in *Doom* and *Doom 3*. As before, it works a treat against the game's smaller and more ineffectual un-armoured enemies.



ROCKET LAUNCHER

Another signature weapon from id, what would a Doom game be without a rocket launcher? This thing comes with an energy reactor packed into its barrel, and we can only begin to imagine what chaos this thing will inflict on the legions of enemies *Eternal* will be throwing at us. We can't wait to get our hands on this thing.





The game features a brand new destruction system that lets you get a better sense of how much damage you have inflicted on an enemy. You'll see chunks of flesh and bone rip apart from bodies in real-time. It's super grim.

> "Destructible demons are the ultimate celebration of the ultra-violence of Doom"





just one viable solution: locate the most violent pathway through unrelenting waves of enemies and push through them as aggressively as you can possibly manage. The quicker you move, the faster the game will reward you with health, ammunition and perhaps even a rare moment of respite. Stay static for a second too long, and death will quickly descend upon you. It's enthralling; the absolute modernisation of the original *Doom* model, and it's a design that *Eternal* is only improving upon.

Every system and mechanic at play in *Eternal* works to emphasise your locomotion, leveraging it for scenes of monstrously chaotic action across combat spaces that dwarf those found in its predecessor. Progression through these twisting maze-like arenas is a patchwork of unflinching violence. The hyper-violent Glory Kills aren't just there to let you revel in blood and guts rendered out in the studio's hugely impressive id Tech 7 engine; it's once again a clever mechanic that the game's levels were designed to exploit.

You are propelled to rip across these levels at speed, tasked with shooting and smashing any enemies in your path before taking the time to tear staggered foes in two to regain a small boost to your reserves. Repeat this until the correct coloured key card emerges from a bullet-ridden carcass. It's incredibly cathartic, even more so thanks to the improved visual fidelity and array of new weapons placed at your disposal.

In *Eternal*, id is eager to ramp up the energy of this core loop. The presence of traversal combos is only there to reduce the closing speed between your position and the location of your next target. While many of the core weapons are receiving an overhaul, none are as exciting as the additions to the iconic Super Shotgun. The signature weapon now has a 'Meat Hook' attached to the front of it, a grappling device that latches onto enemies and reels you in towards them. The amount of ground that you can now cover in an instant is gratuitous.

This is welcome, given the verticality and the spaciousness of the levels that we've seen thus far. Whether it's as Hell descends upon the Earth (a wonderful call-back to *Doom II*) or back in the Moon orbiting facility on Phobos (the BFG 10,000 is calling to us), it's clear that every one of the traversal tools available to us will be needed should we hold any hope of completing laps of these spaces without stuttering. That's where *Eternal* is separating itself from the Doom games of the past: by finding a way to increase the scope of its environments without ever diluting that all-important corridor shooter feel.

"There's a reason that the spaces are larger," says Martin. "If you make a faster race car, you're going to need a bigger race track. Your closing speed is outrageous. It's actually one of the most thrilling things in *Eternal*.

"How many games can you see someone from across a giant sci-fi space and then, like on a skateboard, just rocket towards them and just smash them in the face? It's the best feeling in the world," Martin continues, adding, "Especially now, with all of the different abilities that we've introduced. It's all about closing those distances, and now you can do it in seconds."

Eternal is a carnival of violence. It's monstrously fast and epically violent, and again that's all because of the restraint in design behind the scenes. The Meat Hook is a killer example of this; you can't latch onto any piece of the environment, it can only be used to bring you within shotgun evisceration distance of an enemy. It's a tool designed for traversal, but its only application is for melting holes in any enemy you are reeling towards. "The meat hook is a good example of what Hugo said before. It's about being more aggressive and getting you to push forward," reaffirms Stratton. "We just want to get you closer to the combat; in the case of the Meat Hook, it doesn't grapple any point in the world, it only hooks demons. That use of it is always pulling you face to face with a demon."

"*Doom Eternal* is, as *Doom* (2016) was, an epic action game," continues Martin, bouncing off of his old creative partner with ease. "It's like this big Nineties action movie; you want to feel like you are doing fantastic things, and these tools will allow you to do even greater things this time around."

That's a promise that we don't believe the studio will have any trouble keeping. We don't think it's unfair to suggest that *Doom* (2016), in hindsight, feels like a prototype to what the team was pushing to accomplish – to what it is now achieving with *Eternal*. The id Tech 6 engine – the first engine in the company's history not to be finalised by John Carmack – always felt as if it was labouring a little under the demands of *Doom* (2016) and *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*. Fast forward just three years, and the new id Tech 7 engine seems to be more than up for the challenge of supporting such high-speed and frantic gameplay. It's encouraging the team to fire on all cylinders and create something that looks otherworldly by comparison.

It's great to see a talented team handed the keys to powerful technology; to see a studio going all out in an effort to create something positively otherworldly when held up against anything it has achieved in the past. That is, in all fairness, par for the course when it comes to id. "We are all pretty big tech heads at id and the new id Tech 7 engine will allow us to display ten times the geometric detail and greater texture fidelity than we have ever put on screen," Stratton teased. "And that's all without sacrificing a crazy fast experience running at 60 frames per second."

The team at id has been emboldened to challenge expectations, be that by the success of *Doom* (2016) or its own ambition to take the »



personality of *Doom* (1993) and modernise it in a fresh and unexpected fashion. It's wonderful, too, to see how id is tackling a number of gameplay challenges that have arisen out of its desire to increase the size and verticality of its areas – of the ways it is compensating for the fact that the game now demands that everything run at such a breakneck pace to function as it is intended to.

Moving at ridiculous speeds would be worthless if you didn't still have pinpoint control over your weapons, and that's something that id has only sought to further refine. We mentioned before that the Doom Slayer now has a shoulder-mounted launcher – a design element that ensures that you need never sacrifice the ability to fire your weapon while deploying equipment. In *Doom* (2016), to throw a grenade you'd briefly put away your weapon. That is no longer the case, as it now deploys from the cannon, allowing you to continue focusing your attention and gunfire elsewhere while still littering the battlefields in explosive ordinance.

The id Tech 7 engine is also giving the studio the necessary technical backing to introduce a number of weapon combos that are as visually stunning as they are wholly destructive. The launcher can also function as a flamethrower; setting demons alight doesn't just increase the damage they receive, it also lets you enjoy the spectacle of seeing shards of their armour ping away from their bodies as you continue to fire upon them.

That's actually part of a push on the part of id to increase your visual awareness when racing around the spaces. "The coolest enemies deserve the coolest deaths, so we're spending more time and energy than ever before making sure it feels absolutely amazing every time you shoot, punch, kick, slash or otherwise rip and tear one of the demons," says Stratton, with Martin adding, "We've actually created a whole system for this now, and internally we call it destructible demons."

Destructible demons are the ultimate celebration of the ultra-violence of Doom. Enemies would, of course, explode into a shower of gore as you pumped the final bullet into them in *Doom* (2016), though you never had a firm indication of how close an enemy was to dying ahead of that. That was problematic for *Eternal*; with so many enemies to track and kill in any given combat situation, id needed the player to be able to quickly identify how close an enemy was to dying, particularly the larger foes that dominate the field of view. This system doesn't just look freaking excellent – giving you the opportunity to see armour shards tear away, chunks of flesh launch into the air, and bits of bone fall to the floor – it also provides an easy and visual way to better account for where your attention should be focused.

This newfound sense of visual indication also applies to the items and ammunition that litter the spaces. Every one of the pickups has been redesigned, modelled on those found in *Doom* (1993). id has put time and resources into ensuring that every single pickup is individually lit – each has its own lighting rig atop of it – so that you can easily identify what it is from a distance, even as you are reaching terminal velocity. Do you desperately need more ammunition for the Ballista, a brand new laser launcher that pumps exploding rounds into enemies? Then you should be able to quickly identify it, and use the traversal mechanics and combos at your disposal – be it the Meat Hook, the Dash, the monkey bar swing or the wall climbs – to quickly get over to it without missing a beat.

This, all of this, is integral when you consider how *Eternal* is tilting multiplayer on its head. While the game will feature a traditional PvP experience, built in-house this time around id was keen to confirm, it will also include combative co-operative modes in the form of Invasions. If the legions of enemies bearing down on you weren't enough of a challenge, id has just found another way to make your life a living hell. "We are now giving players the ability to take control of a demon and invade another player's campaign," teases Martin. "This is just another way to add drama and unpredictability to your campaign, and this is just one of the ways that we will allow you to play *Eternal* with your friends."

Stratton is eager to note that this functionality can be switched off in the menu if you'd prefer to play it alone, but if you open it up you might even find that other players can "team up as demons and form a Slayer-hunting party," should you want an extra layer of challenge and drama.

It's funny, because if you strip away the pentagrams, the violence and the guns, *Eternal* is oddly reminiscent of a Nintendo game. Mechanics are at the heart of the entire experience; the entire game is built around how to best service them. That is, of course, classic Doom. It may often feel like the FPS genre has come far in the last 25 years, but the truth is that *Eternal*'s closest touchstone – the comparison that makes the most sense – is that of *Doom* '93. id has taken the personality, speed and devotion to defined mechanical excellence that was so prevalent in the original game and sought to modernise it. The results of this endeavour reveal themselves in ways that you might not expect going into it. That's part of what makes *Eternal* one of the most exciting prospects for 2019; on the surface, it may indeed look like business as usual, but it's clear that there's far more to its execution than meets the eye.

"Every system and mechanic at play in Doom Eternal works to emphasise your locomotion"

■ *Doom Eternal* is expected to launch late 2019 for PC, PS4 and Xbox One. A Switch version (locked to 30 frames per second) is on the way, although it is going to be handled by Panic Button Games – the team responsible for porting *Doom* and *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus*.



■ After the chaos wrought on Hell by the Doom Slayer at the end of the last game, it's no surprise the demons are modelling themselves off of the legendary warrior and assaulting Earth. This is going to be the most ridiculous Doom yet.

ASSEMBLING AN ARMY

After the Doom Slayer caused havoc in Hell, the demons are now storming Earth with everything they've got. That means we should expect to see a suite of new enemies along with the return of some *Doom* and *Doom II* classics. The likes of the Arachnid Tron and Pain Elemental have been updated, their models updated to not only look more terrifying, but to also take advantage of the new destructible demons system, which will see bits of flesh and bone tear out of their bodies as you pepper them with bullets. We've also been given a small tease of the new enemies to come, though id was not forthcoming with information. The first that caught our attention was the Doomhunter, who id went as far as labelling as Doomguy's "arch-enemy", though the second is the one that really has us intrigued. Look carefully enough at this guy, the Marauder – he bears a striking resemblance to the Doom Slayer. There's a reason for that, we're told, but we will have to wait until we play the game to find out more.



ARE GAMES GETTING BETTER AT

REPRESENTATION?



WE SPEAK WITH THE GAME MAKERS AND FAN COMMUNITIES WHO ARE HELPING **GIVE A VOICE TO LGBT+ GAMERS**

"As a gay gamer, words cannot describe what it is like to be able to pick an LGBT+ character that actually reflects you," Curtis Free, co-founder of London Gaymers, a gay gaming group, tells us. This might not seem like much if you've grown up seeing characters you felt you could relate to on a cultural, ethnic or gender level, but anyone who hasn't will tell you it is such a powerful thing. What's more, it feels as if there's a positive expansion of experiences coming from game makers, so we wanted to explore the depth and breadth of that progress with community figures and developers on the cutting edge.

Much like in other media, portrayals of LGBT+ characters have evolved over the decades. Back in the Eighties characters like Nintendo's Birdo, described as 'a male that believes he is female', were typical of the time. Queer characters were there, but only to be laughed at for being LGBT+. This continued into the Nineties with characters like *Chrono Trigger*'s Flea, alluded to be genderqueer, being an enemy the player is encouraged to mock rather than fear. Around the turn of the millennium we saw a shift. In *Metal Gear Solid 2* a bisexual character, Vamp, exists and is accepted as such with no jokes, but nor any depth.

Free believes there are two key changes that have emerged that capture the shift that we've seen in LGBT+ representation in videogames; first there is visibility. "In earlier games, LGBT+ characters' sexual orientation or gender identity was always alluded to or implied, but never explicitly stated. Today we see characters like Tracer from *Overwatch* openly demonstrate she's in a same-sex couple by kissing her girlfriend." However, there is still an issue of representation on screen and not just in supporting media. "A big trend at the moment for videogame developers is to share this LGBT+ visibility through non-core gameplay content, such as comics, literature or downloadable content," as was the case with Tracer.

The second key change is representative. "Earlier LGBT+ representation in videogames really harnessed and embraced a more stereotypical view of what the LGBT+ community was all about, almost to the extent of being seen as a joke," Free continues. "From overly camp characters to leather harnesses, these characters never truly reflected the diversity within the LGBT+ community. Today we see a much wider array of representation, from different body shapes, ages, races and so on."

So why it so important for characters to represent you in Free's eyes? "It's the best way that a videogame company can tell its LGBT+ customers that they're wanted and accepted. At MCM Comic Con in London a few months ago one of the panellists explained that this was very useful to her as a way to gauge her family and friends' response to an LGBT+ character in a videogame – if they were cool with the character it empowered her to come out to them herself."

> In many ways, the critique, like it always does, caused us to step back and re-evaluate what our plans were for Dragon Age: Inquisition
>
> **MIKE LAIDLAW, FORMER CREATIVE DIRECTOR, BIOWARE**

For Free it's not just about empowerment, but also immersion in the experience. "Finding LGBT+ characters in the game that you could romance and build relationships with helps to normalise the behaviour, and for LGBT+ people really allows you to get immersed in the game. The Dragon Age and Mass Effect romances are, usually, very well written, and the variety of LGBT+ romance options means you don't always have to 'pick the gay one'."

Certainly, BioWare has felt as if it is at the forefront of this discussion, at least in the triple-A space. As such, former creative director at BioWare Mike Laidlaw struck us as a good representative for the developer's approach to depicting characters of different identities. Laidlaw oversaw the evolution of BioWare's approach to representation and in our conversation was very passionate about the issues and ideas around it.

So, with everything BioWare has done, does he think games are getting any better at representation? "In general terms, I would have to describe the trend as 'maturing'," Laidlaw tells us. "There's been a mix of negative, clumsy-but-earnest and brilliant attempts made, but compared to the start of the industry we have come a long way."

While some games continued to use negative depictions of LGBT+ people for humour throughout the Nineties and early 21st century, other developers moved with the times. A turning point was the debut Sims game, which came out in 2000. From the very first game, any character could be lesbian, bisexual or gay. Depending on the player's choices, players could create characters and families as they saw fit at a time when just about every other game dictated that characters were all heterosexual. RPG series like The Elder Scrolls and Fable have progressed from including LGBT+ characters in their early games to more fleshed-out and prominent characters as the last decade transitioned to this one.

Where does Laidlaw think this stems from? "I would ascribe a lot of that to both an increase in the will to include LGBT+ content in games and a growing confidence that doing so creates a more interesting and diverse set of characters and stories to be told."

Debuting in 2007 and 2009 respectively, the Mass Effect and Dragon Age titles led the pack in exploring LGBT+ characters and narratives in their respective science-fiction and fantasy worlds. Changes like allowing the player to make their character LGBT+, including LGBT+ storylines relevant to the plot and even romances have massively influenced other developers.

But BioWare, like any developer, has been on a journey that started with a complete absence of LGBT+ narratives in their early games to where they are now. The gradual growth we have seen in gaming is mirrored in BioWare, and Laidlaw feels its brand



BioWare has explored the sexuality of its characters largely through the lens of allowing player expression to drive who they start relationships with and why, but that's also been evolving to include more clearly defined identities among NPCs.



of games has grown increasingly more varied in the stories they tell. "From Star Wars' Juhani's subtle implication that she was attracted to a female Revan to Dragon Age's Iron Bull's much more open and accepting pansexuality, there's been a steady move towards including LGBT+ content. These days we strive for natural and interesting representation in our characters and consider sexuality as much a part of their stories as their history, politics and motivations."

In Dragon Age, for example, BioWare went from having straight and bisexual characters in the first instalment to all romance options being bisexual in the second to finally having gay and lesbian characters in the third. The 'everyone is bisexual' moment was criticised for lacking believability and depth in the characters.

"As to the specific question about *Dragon Age 2*'s romances, I consider them more a stepping-stone than a mistake," Laidlaw says. "If we take the goal of 'having a wider array of romance options and types available to players' I would consider them a success, but also feel that people were right to call them out as being unrealistic. In many ways the critique, like it always does, caused us to step back and re-evaluate what our plans were for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, but I can point to as many people who feel the *Dragon Age 2* answer was the right one as who stridently disagree. What's important to me, though, is that we move with the answer we feel is right, and for *Dragon Age: Inquisition* the right answer was to have a wider array of romantic characters of differing sexualities, because we felt that more closely mirrored real life."

Yusif Ali is one of the co-founders of Gaymers iNC, another London-based LGBT+ gamer group. He tells us that: "For a lot of gaymers who grew up in the Nineties, their first experience of LGBT+ gaming was probably making their Sims kiss each other. It is great to see more games introduce same-sex relationships, especially as an option alongside heterosexual relationships so that everybody can experience the game the way they wish. Playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was the first time I had ever played a game where I had the option to be gay. I was surprised to see the community represented so well through well-rounded characters like Sera (lesbian), Iron Bull (pansexual), Krem (trans) and of course Dorian (gay) and explore their stories. I found Dorian's backstory especially heartfelt, as his father had attempted to cure his homosexuality with blood magic, a nod to the camps around the world that try and 'fix' young LGBT+ teens. Playing a game where you can choose to be anyone and love anyone is incredibly liberating."

> "One of the greatest things about gaming is that it allows you to play with identity"
> **CURTIS FREE, CO-FOUNDER OF LONDON GAYMERS**

Playing games is such a singular kind of entertainment in allowing for active participation and expression in the artform, and now we're seeing even more focused attempts to be more inclusive in depictions of LBGT+ groups. "One of the greatest things about gaming is that it allows you to play with identity, to experience worlds and characters and situations beyond what you'd experience in your own life," says Free. "There are many dating sims, but a gay daddy one? That sounds a bit different and grabs your attention. Coupled with the fact that there's also an element of the gay community being represented here that traditionally hasn't had as much representation in the wider media, let alone games. There are such a huge number of games now in any genre, especially on Steam, that I think diversity can actually help a game stand apart from the crowd. While we're all for highlighting the reality behind the entire breadth of the LGBT+ community through videogames, I think games like *Dream Daddy* are also critical to demonstrate that we are also here to have fun."

In the summer of 2017 we saw the release of *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator*, a visual-novel game where players help a single father romance other single fathers. It was a huge hit, taking many critics by surprise. *Dream Daddy* was of course popular with groups like Gaymers iNC. Ali says: "The dating-sim genre is hugely popular, so it was cool to see an LGBT-focused sim gain such a big following. Even people who downloaded it because they found the concept of dating hot dads funny will have found it's a game full of heart and humour where gay characters are the focus, not the punchline. The creators Vernon [Shaw] and Leighton [Gray] set out to tell a light-hearted story that was respectful of LGBT+ issues and the game does that pretty well. The jokes don't 'punch down'."

We spoke to co-creator, co-writer and art director of *Dream Daddy*, Gray. She wore many hats through the course of the *Dream Daddy* project, but initially came up with the original concept and designed the characters (final character art in the game is by Shanen Pae). "We had figured that *Dream Daddy* would at least be popular within a small subset of people,



■ *Dream Daddy* was a massive success that proved that LGBT+ content is not niche by any means, especially when it handles its subject matter with as much heart and good humour as Game Grumps did.



The growth of more narratively driven content in gaming, exemplified by episodic stories like *Life Is Strange* and its prequel *Before The Storm*, has opened up a space for characters who can be explored more fully as rounded human beings, including their sexuality.

Great LGBT+ themed games you can play right now

WHILE THE GAMING MAINSTREAM CATCHES UP, INDIES HAVE GOT YOU COVERED

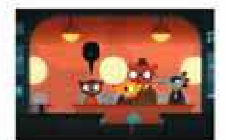


A NORMAL LOST PHONE

RELEASE DATE

26 January 2017
PC, Mobile, Switch

You've found a stranger's phone with access to all of their photos and details, but you don't know who they are or where you might be able to find them. That's more or less how this smart interactive story begins as you delve into the life of Sam and work out what could have happened. It deals brilliantly with issues of identity and prejudice.



NIGHT IN THE WOODS

RELEASE DATE

21 February 2017
PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Mobile

We've waxed on the merits of *Night In The Woods* many times, with particular focus on how the game tackles depression, both mental and societal, as it happens. Another core aspect is its cast of characters who, while zoomorphic in nature, reflect the broad nature of backgrounds people come from, even in a small town. It's nicely handled.



DREAM DADDY: A DAD DATING SIMULATOR

RELEASE DATE

20 July 2017
PC

This visual-novel dating simulator stands out from the crowd, being as it is focused on your player-created father looking for love among other dads. Makes an interesting change from so many of the anime releases out there, although the visual-novel genre has been fertile ground for LGBT+ themes if you dig deep enough. *Dream Daddy* was a welcome breakout hit.

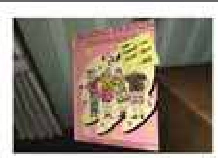


WE KNOW THE DEVIL

RELEASE DATE

12 September 2015
PC

Another great visual novel, this time exploring teenage life through the prism of a Christian summer camp. Your choices through the story, not least which of the characters you spend the most time with, can have a major effect on the ultimate outcome of the game. It handles gender identity and sexuality in a really interesting and clever way.



GONE HOME

RELEASE DATE

15 August 2013
PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch

At the heart of *Gone Home*, for all of its mystery and tension in the face of an absence of other people to interact with, is the story of your sister in the game, Samantha, and her struggle with her identity. She implores you not to investigate, but what choice do you have? Ultimately you get to learn more and more about Sam's life, feelings and world view in a fantastic way.



2064: READ ONLY MEMORIES

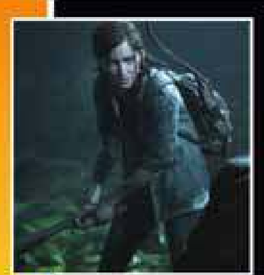
RELEASE DATE

6 October 2016
PC, PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Mobile

While this cyberpunk adventure game travels in many directions and covers a lot of themes, its strong and diverse cast are really what make this game tick. As an adventure it's not really that revolutionary, but the characterisation and the side stories that these characters use to colour the world makes for an fascinating look into the future.

Gaming's LGBT+ icons

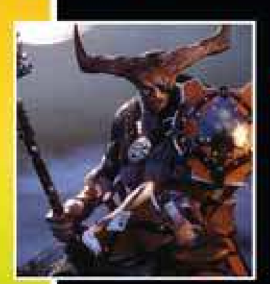
These characters have helped to destigmatise perceptions and become real champions of representation



Ellie

THE LAST OF US

Chances are, if Ellie were real and capable of reacting to the concept of being considered an icon of any kind she would be horrified, appalled and not a little uncomfortable with the concept. But that's part of why she's so special; she's a grounded, pragmatic, caring but steely person. She's a fully rounded character with desire and a rational mind, and that makes her special in the gaming world.



Iron Bull

DRAGON AGE: INQUISITION

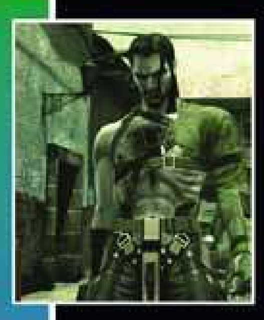
Perhaps the thing we love most about Iron Bull is how upfront and self-actualised he is. There's no great artifice to his character. He knows who he is, he knows what he's capable of and he knows who he wants to be romantic with. Those are pretty admirable qualities. We also really like Dorian and Sera, but we didn't want to pack out this section with *Inquisition* characters.



Chloe

LIFE IS STRANGE/BEFORE THE STORM

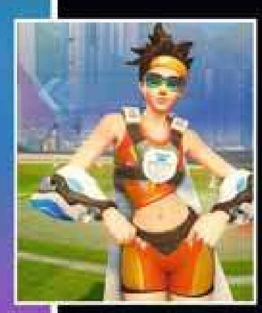
There's so much going on with Chloe through both of the Life Is Strange stories so far; she goes through the ringer and seems to be really fighting with herself about the person she's going to be. But that's what teenage life is like for many of us, and in that respect Chloe's journey is a universal one of emotions maturing and viewpoint clarifying. It's just that for Chloe love seems too often tinged with tragedy.



Vamp

METAL GEAR SOLID 2/METAL GEAR SOLID 4

LGBT+ characters as villainous figures was something of a trope in games for a while, and on the surface you might think that's where Vamp falls too with his bisexuality, but we don't think so. In actual fact, like so many Metal Gear baddies, he's a rather fun and charismatic figure and his sexual identity is part of confident, aggressive, vampiric persona. He wears it loud and proud and we have to respect that.



Tracer

OVERWATCH

You might think that there's no real point to defining sexual identities to the *Overwatch* roster given its lack of in-game narrative, but here's the thing: *Overwatch*'s heroes lived long before the game's release, existing in fan communities, pondered about and mused on for fan fiction. Having defined lives is actually very impactful, and a lesbian cover star to a major triple-A shooter is nothing to be sniffed at.

The Sims series has been a breakthrough gaming experience for a number of reasons, thanks in large part to its accessibility. Being able to influence the lives and personalities of your sims opened up a lot of identity expressions that have been otherwise absent from most games over the years.

Fable II included a Potion of Transmogrification that was single use and could transform you irreversibly from a woman to a man or a man to a woman, which was an interesting if rather narrow and shallow look at trans identity. If you had already married in the game and your partner wasn't bisexual they would reject you.

Blizzard has stated that its roster of characters in *Overwatch* represent a wide array of identities, but thus far only Tracer's sexuality has been officially confirmed and depicted in some of the wider media.

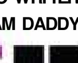








but we really had no idea that it would blow up the way it did. It's been out for [a year] and it blows my mind every day that we've been able to share our hot dads with so many people. I'm extremely grateful for everyone who played the game and all of the ridiculously talented fan artists, fan-fic writers and cosplayers."



> It's pretty awesome to see so many recent games try to tackle or incorporate LGBT+ themes and characters, even if they're doing it imperfectly
>
> **LEIGHTON GRAY, CO-CREATOR, CO-WRITER AND ART DIRECTOR, DREAM DADDY**

We asked Gray how she feels about LGBT+ inclusion in gaming. "If you compare triple-A games that have come out in the past year or so to the games that were coming out ten years ago, it's pretty awesome to see so many recent games try to tackle or incorporate LGBT+ themes and characters, even if they're doing it imperfectly. At their best, LGBT+ characters actually exist without being stereotyped or their entire personality revolving around their sexuality and there are more options for romantic relationships in-game with characters who are men who like men or women who like women, as opposed to being stuck with exclusively straight romances."

Speaking to Laidlaw, he is surprised people were amazed by *Dream Daddy*'s success. "It's a really well-executed visual novel with a light tone that seemed like it would do fantastically from the moment I heard of it. I'm delighted it has." We asked if he feels it will have any impact on how BioWare makes games. "I don't think its success will cause specific changes to how BioWare approaches storytelling, except to continue the vector I think we've already established. We feel characters should be deep and fully realised regardless of their sexuality and I take games like *Dream Daddy* as just affirmation that we're on the right track."

Gray feels there's a lot of stuff BioWare is doing right, but also points out where it's stumbled, such as the trans character in *Mass Effect Andromeda* who deadnames herself (refers to her masculine birth name) upon introduction and the awkward line of questioning that comes up when you interact with Krem in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. "Having media that makes mistakes in its attempts to be diverse and inclusive is, while often disappointing, also extremely important to furthering the dialogue about what works and what doesn't. These imperfect representations help us learn to craft better and more diverse gaming experiences. There's no such thing as perfect representation, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be striving for it!"

Gray thinks that the most exciting part about games right now is that the increased access to the tools needed to make a videogame is breaking down a lot of the industry gatekeeping for creators who aren't straight cisgender white men. "This is leading us towards a greater diversity of creators and content and there's a lot of enthusiasm, especially in indie spaces, for games that explore non-traditional themes. And based on the success of *Dream Daddy* and games like Dragon Age or Mass Effect, which have such a strong emphasis on exploring character and sexuality, I think that the future of games with LGBT+ themes is looking bright. There's clearly a huge seemingly untapped demographic of gamers like us who want to consume content that represents them and I'm really looking forward to watching how this shift towards inclusiveness in games evolves further."

In future, however, will we see more LGBT+ characters in videogames in leading roles?

"We've already seen that trend start," Laidlaw says. "The story between Riley and Ellie in *The Last Of Us: Left Behind* tells a story with an LGBT+ character as the lead, and I expect we will see more over time. As to whether a game like Dragon Age would have a fixed LGBT+ character as the lead? I'd consider it unlikely, but that's due to our focus on character creation being in the player's hands. The player's ability to make anyone he, she or they wants as the lead character is central to the experience of playing a Dragon Age game. I fully expect the franchise to continue featuring LGBT+ characters prominently, but I think it would be a disservice to our players' expectations to lock their main character into a specific role for a core game in the franchise. Now, in a different offering it might absolutely be possible and has been done. In the *Leliana's Song* DLC for *Dragon Age: Origins* you played as a young Leliana, who is bisexual and was put at odds with her girlfriend at the time, Marjolaine."

So are games becoming more inclusive? Laidlaw thinks that the industry at large is becoming more welcoming and more thoughtful, "which is always a good sign. This can range from the larger 'there are romances for gay characters here' kinds of investment to subtle-yet-thoughtful nods to inclusion, such as the recently launched *Dauntless* where they let you pick from two body types, but explicitly do not refer to them using gendered language."

Ali is optimistic. "I hope the future for the LGBT+ gaming community is bright. We're starting to see more studios use LGBT+ characters that break the mould and don't pander to stereotypes, and gamers are being given more romance options in blockbuster titles. Young gamers will grow up seeing LGBT+ characters and relationships, which is something my generation did not get to experience as much. There are still homophobic comments made in online gaming and one way to tackle it is to put LGBT characters front and centre - such as Tracer in *Overwatch*. Their value to the community cannot be understated."

It may not be perfect or offer everything we want, but there's no denying the videogames industry has come a long way in the past three or four decades. Women remain under-represented and racial diversity continues to be a challenge, but for young LGBT+ gamers, growing up in a culture that represents characters like them can have a lasting positive impact by reducing feelings of isolation. And for young straight gamers, playing the new wave of games with more diverse casts of characters might help to build a more inclusive state of mind. That can only be good for all of us.

Reviews

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WE HAPPY FEW

After plenty of time in early access, just how much has Compulsion's imaginative new release changed and improved?





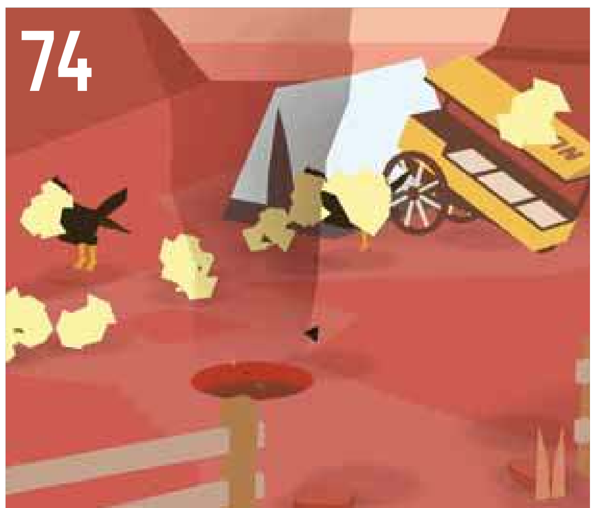
THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

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Above: Combat does a good job of having an impact, but can be tough against three or more enemies, so it's often better to avoid if possible.

AN ODE TO JOY

We Happy Few

There's a point quite early on with *We Happy Few* where a familiar sense of atmosphere sets in. Having gone through the motions of the opening sections, main character Arthur finds himself in the lush yet abandoned fields outside the city proper. One of the first structures we come to is suitably derelict, and once inside the home our attention is drawn to a large scrawl on the wall of two children with their faces scribbled out. In the background an eerie tune plays on a record player, the sort of track that wouldn't be out of place in the latest psychological horror. Toys are strewn about the beds upstairs, while Arthur alludes to some major, catastrophic event.

There are no enemies, no detectable threats, and yet there's still a tangible sense of dread. The building might look different, the rolling hills might not conjure a sense of claustrophobia, but the tone is so familiar it's enough to think a Splicer might be standing right behind us the moment that creepy record is switched off. The *BioShock* sensibilities are strong here, and *We Happy Few* does a commendable effort of withstanding such comparisons. And in much the same way that Rapture is iconic for its sense of place and of purpose, so too is Wellington Wells.

A mix of style and its Sixties setting gives *We Happy Few* something unique. As the story unravels there's a good amount of depth to it. There are no real 'would you kindly?' moments and no overarching Andrew Ryan characters to espouse political musings about the state of the town and, with it, human nature, but it is a fulfilling story, and perhaps the key reason to give *We Happy Few* a shot. There's a quality to it, too, with authentically British dialogue and voice acting that could have all too easily fallen apart.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Gearbox Publishing
DEVELOPER: Compulsion Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, triple-core 2.0GHz CPU, 8GB RAM, GeForce 460 GTX/AMD Radeon 5870, 6GB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE GAME IS ABOUT BALANCING SOCIAL ANXIETY WITH GETTING TO WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

The crux of it all revolves around the hallucinogenic Joy, a literal happy pill that keeps the populace in a constant state of euphoria - and as a result placated and malleable. It's all a little *Brave New World*, but it's a dystopian idea that is rarely explored within videogames. You'll play as three distinct characters, each with their own specific input into the narrative. But Joy is more than just a plot device: since the town's inhabitants have become so culturally reliant on the drug, anyone who doesn't partake is chastised and even, ultimately, run out of town.

Therein is the major function of the gameplay, where you'll need to interact with the world in an subordinate manner: walk, don't run; wear the right clothes; keep that smile up. It's about balancing the Joy dependency, which – when taken – gives the world a visual glow and helps calm those otherwise hypersensitive NPCs. However, it can be something of a nuisance. The withdrawal effects are debilitating, for example, and will be a surefire giveaway that you're a 'Downer', leading you

FAQs

Q. MUCH TO EXPLORE?
It's a survival game at its core, so exploration is important. But this is for crafting parts and not for interesting world details.

Q. A SURVIVAL GAME?
Yep. There's even a sandbox mode, but the mechanisms just aren't compelling enough to work like *Rust* or *Minecraft*.

Q. SURVIVE FROM WHAT?
Well, good question. There's no real danger beyond being outed as a Downer, which makes the whole point of survival gameplay kind of moot.



Above: The retro-futuristic style is perhaps its most winning achievement, utilising a thematic look of the Sixties, except with Fallout-like technology.



Below: Each character has their own preferential playstyle, but not to such an extent that it'll direct how you play. Sally can create an alternate drug called Happiness, which gives the outward effects of Joy, but none of the withdrawal symptoms.

to have to spend an awkward amount of time hiding from sight until the withdrawal has worn off. It is such a bother, in fact, that it's actually better to ignore the drug completely and just race around the town getting to your destination and just deal with the consequences – thereby undoing the whole central mechanism around which *We Happy Few* revolves. If that means a fight with a group of the local bobbies, then so be it. Combat is weighty enough to be enjoyable, though not so much that you'd rather instigate a potential life-threatening ruckus than avoid one. But it's still the better option than wasting time hiding under a bed.

Things aren't helped much by the fact that the game becomes little more than one long fetch quest, into and out of the town. It's sandbox in nature, an open-world environment, but one that doesn't really have much in the way of player involvement. It is a setting, not a playspace, in part because playing in such a space would only draw attention in its society of conformation.

There is exploration, though, which means rummaging through bins for bobby pins and gathering up scraps of cloth. Perhaps a failsafe from the recent trend of survival games and the game's heritage within Early Access, but all this means is that you'll spend much of your time in the game vacuuming up parts just to craft various items later on. It's almost arbitrarily added on and doesn't really add much to the game; if anything, it detracts from the strengths of the world, since it becomes less about interacting and exploring and more about crouching about rifling through filing cabinets and drawers. There's no real desire to do so, either, it's just built on the innate gamer's compulsion to hoard things.

The issue is that this weakens the benefits of the game, though. *We Happy Few* is a confused title, at once solid in its identity but with a set of gameplay systems that are at odds with its own goals and themes. The idea is to make the player feel a sense of paranoia as they explore the world, but that doesn't happen; instead it's just a set of frustrations. You'll be irritated about having to swap outfits according to your location, hunting down specific crafting parts just to progress the story or the having to balance social anxiety with getting to where you want to go.

Its story is well-told and a treat aesthetically, and in that sense it's appealing enough that it's worth playing for that alone. But it suffers for its mechanisms: in much the same way that the overuse of Joy is a detriment to the inhabitants of Wellington Wells, a little more restraint from the developers could've allowed for a more finely honed experience that doesn't struggle with its systems to allow the intrigue and style to rise.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

JOY TO THE WORLD: The interesting dystopian setting of *We Happy Few* is by far its strongest asset, as much for the rarity of it. Unfortunately the game's mechanisms work in contrast to it, rather than in conjunction. Smarter focus on what it does well was necessary here.

WE THREE

The three playable characters are distinct enough, each offering an interlocking story arc from three very different perspectives. Arthur is saddled with regret over losing his brother as part of the alluded Very Bad Thing, Sally is a chemist helping to create a newer strain of Joy, while Ollie is ex-military living in the outskirts of Wellington Wells, and with it the social norms that come with Joy use. They each have their own playstyles, too, with Arthur focused on blending in, Sally more about stealth and Ollie having a preference for combat. This doesn't change too much about the game, but the intersecting paths and stories make for an interesting variety of characters.

BETTER THAN
HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION



WORSE THAN
BIOSHOCK



VERDICT 6/10
A COMPELLING STORY BUT MUNDANE SURVIVAL GAMEPLAY

DID WE KNEAD A SEQUEL, DOUGH?

Overcooked 2

Have you ever worked in a kitchen? The clichés are true, you know. The explosive tempers of the head chefs. The vein-bursting tantrums of dissatisfied customers. The dodgy scents radiating from the dude on washing up duty, and the impassioned debates over the five-second rule. You can survive anything if you've been a waiter or a kitchen assistant. Even *Overcooked*. For starters, floor-strewn ingredients, a stack of dirty dishes and a kitchen on fire don't even begin to compare to the carnage of a Sunday Carvery shift.

It's not just the chaos, though. *Overcooked* is one of those delightful party games that's so much greater than its disparate parts. Yes, it's stuffed with charm and colour, and yes, everything – from the environmental design to the food items to the cute 'n' cuddly chefs themselves – are lovingly, carefully crafted. But it's the combination of all those things – the score, the visuals and the utter mayhem of the kitchen, of course – that, when thrown together into the pan, made the original *Overcooked* game an instant family-friendly hit.

So quite why, just two short years later, Ghost Town Games has felt the need to press a sequel upon us, we're not sure. *Overcooked 2* offers a handful of new ideas, yes, but essentially it's very much more of the same. Which leaves us asking one important question: are we hungry enough to gobble up a second helping just yet?

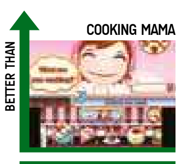
It's hard to know what to expect if you've never played *Overcooked* before. It's self-described as "a chaotic co-op cooking game", which is true enough, but it's also a whole lot more than that, too. To truly succeed, you need to not only be a whizz in the kitchen and a careful meal planner, but also a master of communication and diplomacy, too… especially when the floor's covered in burnt rice and your gaming partner's just "accidentally" thrown your carefully made burrito into the bin. Again.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, PC, PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Team 17
DEVELOPER: Ghost Town Games
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

COOKING MAMA





ROCKET LEAGUE

WORSE THAN



Above: Just looking at this screenshot hurts our head. Just look at the state of it. We don't know it yet, but any moment now we're going to need *both* of those fire extinguishers… even though we're only boiling rice, urgh.

Below: Don't forget the washing up! A lack of clean crockery will catch you out (and slow you down) every time. Scour your level carefully; if there's a sink, you need to wash up to keep up with the customer demand.

YOU NEED TO NOT ONLY BE A WHIZZ IN THE KITCHEN, BUT ALSO A MASTER OF COMMUNICATION AND DIPLOMACY, TOO



FAQs

Q. PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE?
Not needed! The tutorial's a little brief, granted, so keep an eye on recipes that pop up on the loading screen for tips.

Q. EASY FOR NEWBS?
Be patient with co-op buddies – the control scheme takes a little getting used to, especially for gaming newbies.

Q. THREE STARS OR BUST?
No, you don't *have* to get Three Stars on every level to proceed… but striving for full marks is never wrong.

Below: Don't play on an empty stomach. We finished several matches with a hankering for burritos and dumplings.



RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Overcooked 2 turns up the heat with more recipes this time around, including ones we're already familiar with from the original game – such as the burgers, pizza and burritos – plus some tasty new offerings, including steamed dumplings, pasta and sushi. If that sounds complicated, that's because it is; getting to grips with the new ingredients – and how best to prep them – is vital to securing those Three Star ratings. Extra complexities such as mixers and steamers only serve to make things even more chaotic, and there's a few additional preparatory touches to remember, too. Don't let the super-simple tutorial fool you – it takes nerves of steel and an MBA in business management to keep these kitchens shipshape.

That's the key bit here, by the way: co-operative play. Yes, you can explore the story and versus modes alone, but to really enjoy *Overcooked 2* – to really test yourself, and the relationships you have with your nearest and dearest – please make use of the couch co-op. You'll thank us for it later. Or maybe blame us. One or the other, anyway.

Each round's success depends on the number of meals you safely deliver into the mouths of hungry customers, with bonus 'tips' helping you fatten your shift's takings. This time around, the palates of your discerning guests have matured a little, which means you need to craft complex things like sushi and dumplings along with the pizzas and burgers we've come to love and loathe in equal measure from the prior game.

Despite the brief tutorial there's not much instruction, though, so if you're thinking of grabbing a drink while the game loads, we'd advise otherwise. New recipes are only shared on the loading screen (along with endless reminders of the control scheme, for reasons we can't understand either), so sometimes we didn't even notice a new recipe was coming until the level began and everything started going horribly wrong. Things go horribly wrong a lot in these kitchens, but that's part of the 'fun'.

Naturally, it starts out simple enough. The tomato salads are insultingly easy, but it doesn't take long for the difficulty to ramp up, and your meals to require a little more forward-planning to keep your diners happy. There are a lot of things to master all at once: chopping, frying, boiling, steaming, plating up, washing up and serving. In single-player mode you're given an extra pair of hands by way of an additional chef that you can switch between to multitask, but really, the fun – and the shouting and swearing, of course – comes only in co-operative mode.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

A BROADER PALATE: *Overcooked 2* builds masterfully on the recipe of the original game, introducing a range of new tasks that require not just a little chopping, but also boiling, steaming and mixing, too.

Players can now toss ingredients to each other, or even directly into fryers or pans if you're clever/flukey enough, which makes an already-crowded screen even busier, especially if you're boasting the full complement of four players. In some instances, however, you'll *have* to do this, as the environments chop and change around you, forcing chefs to work in careful collaboration to get meals plated and served.

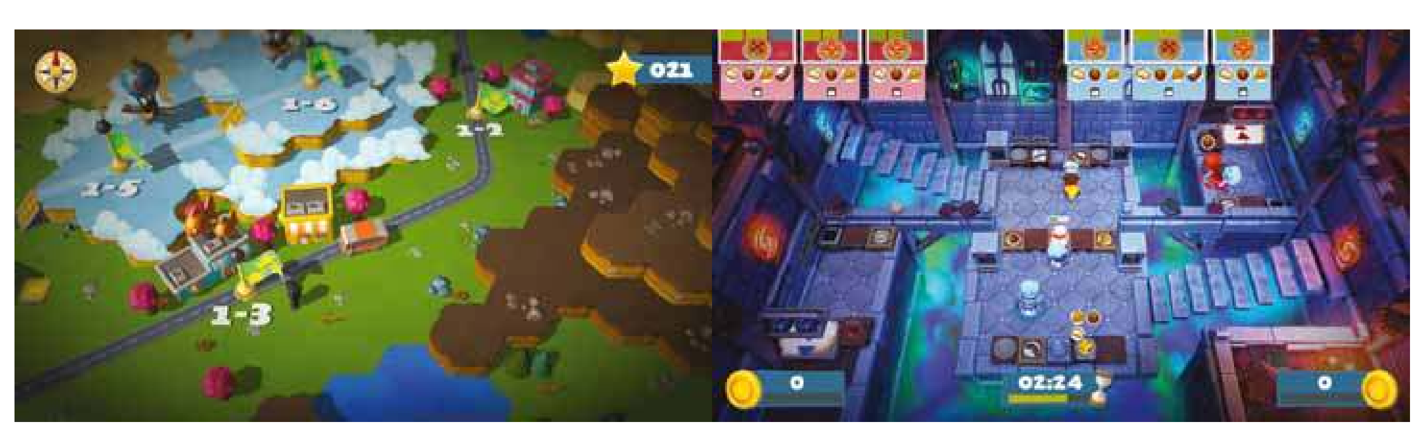
However, while most of these extra obstacles add a delicious layer of complexity to proceedings, some levels feel unbalanced, especially if you're zooming around at full pelt one minute, and the next you're just left standing there, uselessly holding a plate of cooked food as you wait for a balloon raft to float back in order for you to serve it.

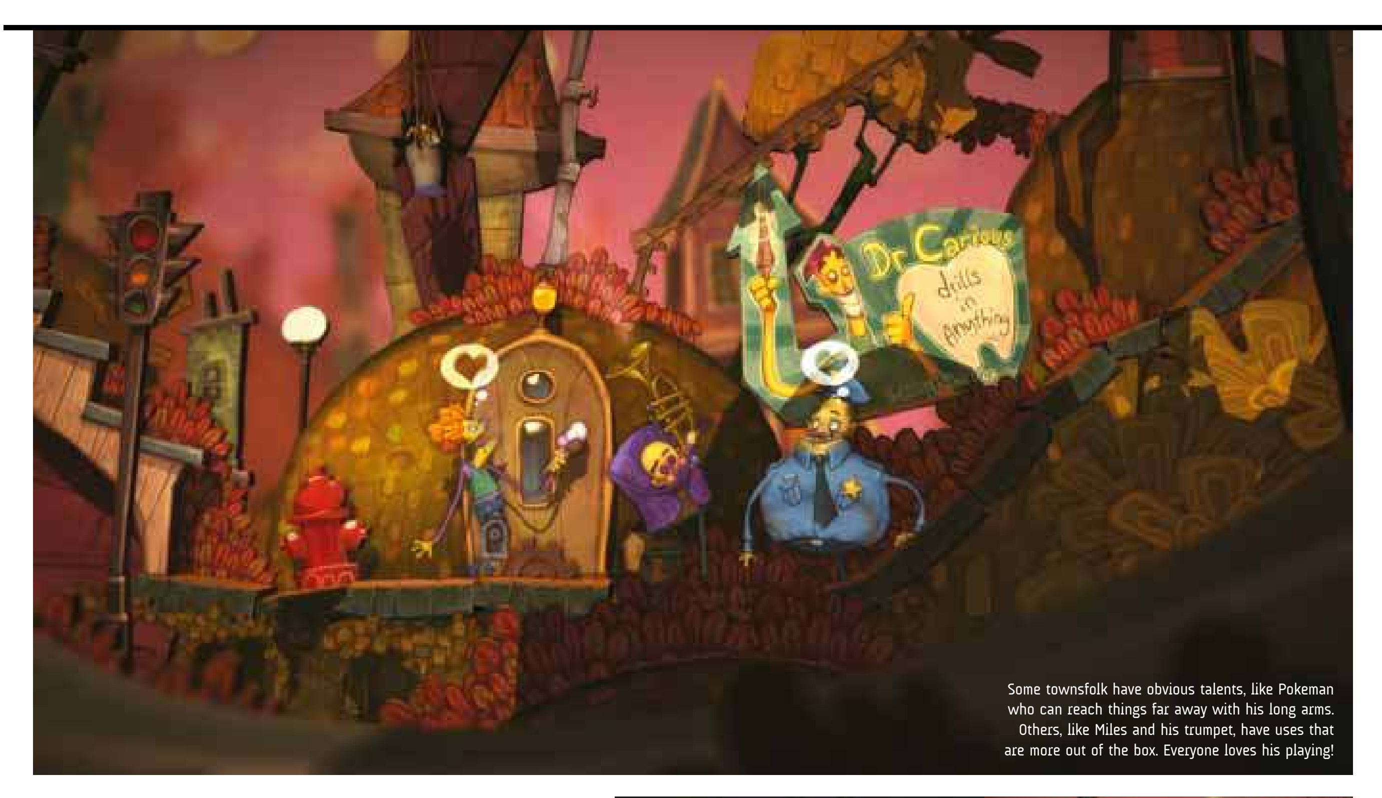
It looks *stunning*, though, no matter where you are, or what you're doing. From the army of the Unbread (nope, not a typo), to the cute little isometric, hex-based, toy box-esque overworld map, every element is perfectly crafted, and each level design – be it a mine, a haunted house, a hot air balloon or a raft on the rapids – the perfect backdrop.

No, you don't need to have played *Overcooked* to understand *Overcooked 2*, and no, we probably don't need a sequel just yet, especially as it doesn't quite bring enough new ideas. If you were hoping for something a bit different from the sequel you're likely to leave disappointed, as very little has changed from the original game. That said, Ghost Town Games has kept everything that made the first title so wonderfully moreish, which means if you loved the first, you'll definitely want a bite of this one.

Someone needs to get the union involved, mind. We've no idea why our chefs also have to contend with the washing up.

VERDICT 8/10
A NEW AND IMPROVED RECIPE FOR FAMILY FUN





Some townsfolk have obvious talents, like Pokeman who can reach things far away with his long arms. Others, like Miles and his trumpet, have uses that are more out of the box. Everyone loves his playing!

NO REST AND NO PEACE

Flipping Death

Penny Doewood is dead and that's only the beginning of her problems. A series of ridiculously unlikely but nevertheless deadly accidents weave together the time-bending mysteries of her hometown. Flatwood Peaks is a two-dimensional paper-crafted town that splits its influence between point-and-click puzzle adventures and side-scrolling platformers.

After Penny's tragic fall, she's conscripted as a temp for Death himself, who is apparently long overdue for a holiday. With Death's scythe and a stylish new cape, Penny uses her powers of possession to solve the problems of the living and dead.

When Penny possesses each of her fellow Flatwoodians she has the ability to walk them around town, referred to as 'quirking around', performing whatever skill it is they have. The dentist flails his tooth drill about with a carelessness that suggests his licence ought to be revoked. A jazz trumpeter plays with the ferocity to move objects. Pokeman, an apparent amateur superhero, wiggles around town poking anyone they can lay a finger on.

Penny's ability to possess her fellow citizens is powered by collectible spirit critters in each level. Some only need to be touched to collect while others require short jumping challenges under a time limit. None are particularly challenging and we found ourselves wishing the half-hearted platforming was dropped in favour of tying spirit collection more closely to puzzle solving.

Flipping Death sidesteps the common adventure game pitfall in which you find yourself out of bright ideas and are thus left exasperatedly combining items. The characters will often call out vague hints about their own usefulness when Penny possesses them and when that isn't enough, a hints menu in each level provides sketched hints suggesting which character to use and how. It's an accessible but inconspicuous system that keeps *Flipping Death* moving along at a steady pace.

We avoid cliché wherever possible, but if any game were ever 'bursting with personality' it's *Flipping Death*. The grotesque and clownish characters are the same recognisable style from *Stick It To The Man!*, its spiritual predecessor. Flatwood Peaks' lanky-armed townspeople have among them the sum total manual dexterity of a plate of pasta, which is the source of at least one fourth-wall breaking joke. The hapless citizens and judgmental narrator both earned plenty of our out-loud laughter with their self-aware dialogue and excellent voice talent.

Flipping Death is able to confidently nail the peculiar and unexpected Rube Goldberg machine solutions that we've come to associate with adventure games. We'd never willingly paint a boat with our tongues, but that's the sort of can-do attitude Penny uses to wrangle her living peers. Despite the weak platforming elements it carried over from *Stick It To The Man!*, *Flipping Death* is an earnest and genuinely tickling game that deserves the ten hours it will ask of you.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Zoink
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Dual-core 2.1GHz processor, Nvidia GeForce GT 550, 4GB RAM, 3GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE PUZZLES: Collecting spirits would be less of a chore without platforming tying it down. Our favourite finds are spirit critters needed for one puzzle locked behind the solution to another puzzle.



A VALIANT EFFORT TO KILL WITH LAUGHTER



Above: Nintendo is finally becoming more modern and even retrofits the classic games we loved, only with Wario in the lead role. There's something so very wrong yet so incredibly right about replaying World 1-1 as Wario.

ALWAYS BELIEVE THAT HE STOLE

WarioWare Gold

It must be a bitter pill to swallow being Wario. You see Mario constantly fails to protect his beloved princess, being forced to rescue her time and time again, and really, the only thing that makes you a 'bad guy' is that you eat too much garlic and are a bit greedy. I mean, is greed really that bad when all it amounts to is a desire to not be so poor that you can't afford pizza? And that's all this dude wants: some pizza, and probably world domination.

Regardless of his social status, this is another micro-game collection in the long-running series that ties together all the previous games in, well, what is basically a micro-game-collection collection. We're talking the touch-based games, the button-mashing fun times, and of course the tilt-based type. All your favourites return, including the one where you pick a hair out of a huge cartoon nose, and that one where you give someone a dodgy haircut by hammering a button.

If you're a returning player, this is (mostly) a greatest hits collection of the three previous styles of WarioWare games. If you're a newcomer: where have you been? Wario's micro-games are consistently daft, but brilliantly pick-up-and-play in nature. As usual there's a ridiculous story revolving around Wario's need to have every penny in the Kingdom, but this time he's putting on an esports Olympic Games of sorts, and he's forcing his 'friends' (it's never clear if he's forever alone, or just irritating to these people) to make mini-games for would-be challengers to compete in.

The twist this time is that the entire game is voiced. Charles Martinet (of Mario fame) voices Wario, and it's bizarre to hear some of the most voice acting he's done for a Nintendo game as Wario and not his goody-two-shoes almost-namesake. In fact, hearing full sentences and actual dialogue is borderline nightmare fuel. It's so strange experiencing these whacky Italian voices come to life in more than just catchphrase form. He does a good job, of course, it's just weird.

Aside from the core aspects, there are collectibles that offer up trophies and tidbits on Nintendo's past. It's all very nice, but it's not really going to keep you coming back. And therein lies *Gold*'s biggest problem. Were it a new game on Switch (which, let's face it, everyone wanted it to be), it'd perhaps be a nice introduction to the series, but as a collection, it's not going to last you very long.

What's here is great fun, though. The story parts are excellent as always and the visuals are just gorgeous, but it all feels like a farewell, or even a nostalgic memory tickle, rather than something that warrants the 'must-play' moniker, especially with the plethora of games already no doubt sat on your digital shelves begging to be played.

So it's a conundrum then: to new players, you're going to understand what fans have been banging on about for years, begging for mainstream success and huge-budget home console versions. A good game, then, but one that could have been amazing.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems/Nintendo
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

IT'S FOR EVERYONE: Simple controls mean that anyone can enjoy the fun.
NINTENDO GOING NUTS: This is a rare look at a more whacky Nintendo. More of this please!

VERDICT 7/10

A FUN REMINDER OF HOW GREAT THE WARIOWARE SERIES IS.



SWEET, BUT NOT TOO FILLING

Donut County

A game becoming something of a trending social media darling prior to release has its pros and cons and it might take a moment for some of that to fall away as you play *Donut County.* The promise of a cute, colourful and bizarre puzzler that sees you move a hole around the world, swallowing up everything you can has been fulfilled, but that concept in and of itself only holds your attention for a few minutes. Thankfully *Donut County* has the goods to hold onto you for a little while longer.

Donut County isn't a massive game and that's for the best. At about four hours of playing time (and that's if you really pore over the Trashopedia entries and stretch out some of the text messaging cut scenes by sending ducks instead of replies) *Donut County* is a nice, sharp, in and out kind of game. Its very concept is one long gag and like any sharp joke, it needs to hit that punchline nice and quickly or lose its momentum. Thankfully it packs plenty of momentum and plenty of wit. The writing on this game is very good with some wonderful anthropomorphised characters all of whom feel like nicely rounded out personalities and each one weirder than the one before. The dialogue between these characters, largely between levels, is a real joy and ends up filling in the gaps between puzzles so well that we honestly couldn't tell you if by the end we were playing the puzzles to reach the cutscenes or clicking through the cutscenes to play the levels. It all merged together in a very satisfying way.

But the real draw here is the puzzling and the world guzzling. Not unlike the Katamari series with which this game was almost immediately compared in its style and humour, *Donut County*'s hole moving and items swallowing mechanics are simple in concept and made magical with their execution. The joy comes from seeing something you want to see fall down your hole and working out the path of destruction needed to make that happen. Thanks to a physics engine that gives every object just the right amount of inertia, it's really very satisfying watching an item teeter on the edge and gradually tip down into oblivion.

THE REAL DRAW HERE IS THE PUZZLING AND THE WORLD GUZZLING

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Mobile
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER: Ben Esposito
PRICE: £12.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows Vista SP2 64-bit or later
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: Each stage of the game is broken up with a scene involving the population of Donut County telling the story of how they ended up under the ground thanks to the hole-moving antics of BK. The interactions are a lot of fun.

FAQs

Q. FUNNY THEN?
Certainly, *Donut County* has a great sense of humour and manages to poke fun at itself and the world it inhabits rather nicely.

Q. BETTER THAN *HOLE.IO*?
All day long. That multiplayer imitation of the concept has none of the character or satisfying feel of this version.

Q. ENOUGH MEAT ON THE BONE?
It's a quick game, but it's not asking for a lot of cash on PC or PS4 and it's even cheaper on mobile, so worth your investment.

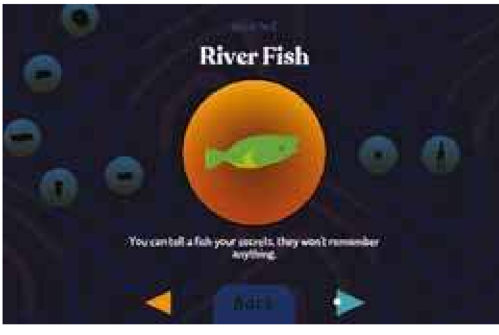






Below: The clean, flat art style may appear quite simplistic on the surface, but it allows for a lot of colour and life in the game as the layers build up on one another. The character designs are each quite unique too, with their own personality.



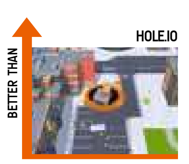




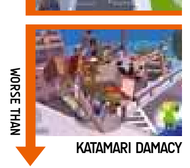
Above: Make sure you give the Trashopedia a read after each stage as the entries can be very amusing.

BETTER THAN

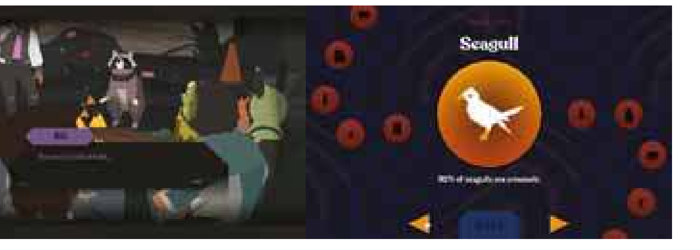
HOLE.IO



WORSE THAN



KATAMARI DAMACY



A RACOON'S EYE VIEW

We highly recommend giving the Trashopedia a good read through at the end of each stage. On the surface it may appear to be a simple chronicle of all of the objects you've managed to eat up on the preceding stage, but in actuality it's a momentary glimpse into the mind of BK, the racoon with the hole app that's wreaking havoc on his town. His descriptions of the items he has collected ranges from the wonderfully simplistic to the utterly confused. And they sort of tell a story too, with his seeming hatred of birds, distrust of rabbits and love of anything trash related. The fact that he seems very confused about what a donut really is when he runs the donut shop also becomes more and more apparent.

Somehow the lack of animation, the rigidness of it all, only makes it funnier.

And the pace of the game feels right too. The hole can't be moved around too fast, but that allows you more time to savour the world design, the limited animations and to play with the world a little. While it may be built in Unity, there's a sense of reins being put on this world, a line of visual fidelity or technical prowess that cannot be crossed, but *Donut County* thrives within those boundaries. It's not reaching for the stars, just for the funny bone and it seeks the fastest path to that point. The end result is a game that feels compelling and logical, but doesn't offer a wow factor or any truly great surprises.

The puzzles themselves, whether they are directly about finding a way to swallow up the largest structure on the screen or interacting with some switch element that's available to you, are pretty straightforward. *Donut County* is not a game looking to tax your grey matter. It's about a smooth, entertaining ride where you feel nicely rewarded for putting the pieces together for yourself even if the solution is pretty simple. Frankly, none of the levels are large enough or diverse enough in their interaction to pose too much of a challenge. The final moments of the game exemplify this, offering perhaps the greatest challenge in terms of forcing you to move and think on your feet a little more than you have for the previous few hours, but still giving you ample opportunities to try again and get it right. Still, it features one of the better boss battles we've encountered in recent memory, the art having been somewhat lost it would seem by others in the industry.

Ultimately, the running joke of it all doesn't necessarily hold up to much scrutiny so we recommend not thinking too much about it. It's absurd and silly and should be approached as such. We give Ben Esposito a great deal of credit in recognising that in order to give the game a sense of story and progression he needed to break out of the same mechanical loop pretty quickly, offering up some variety in how the hole is used, introducing water that fills the hole or a catapult that lets you fire things out again to interact with the world. *Donut County* keeps things moving and changing nicely, if not to any particularly deep degree.

The term shallow seems a little harsh to be used with regard to this game, but it's not entirely inaccurate. As we mentioned, the joke of using a hole to swallow up the world only stretches so far and the confused pleas of innocence from the racoon culprit at the centre of the town's misfortunes can only sustain the 'I was wronged by you too and this is how' flashback structure for a short time. By the end it left us wanting more, which given the concept and how easily it could have outstayed its welcome, we have to say is a victory.

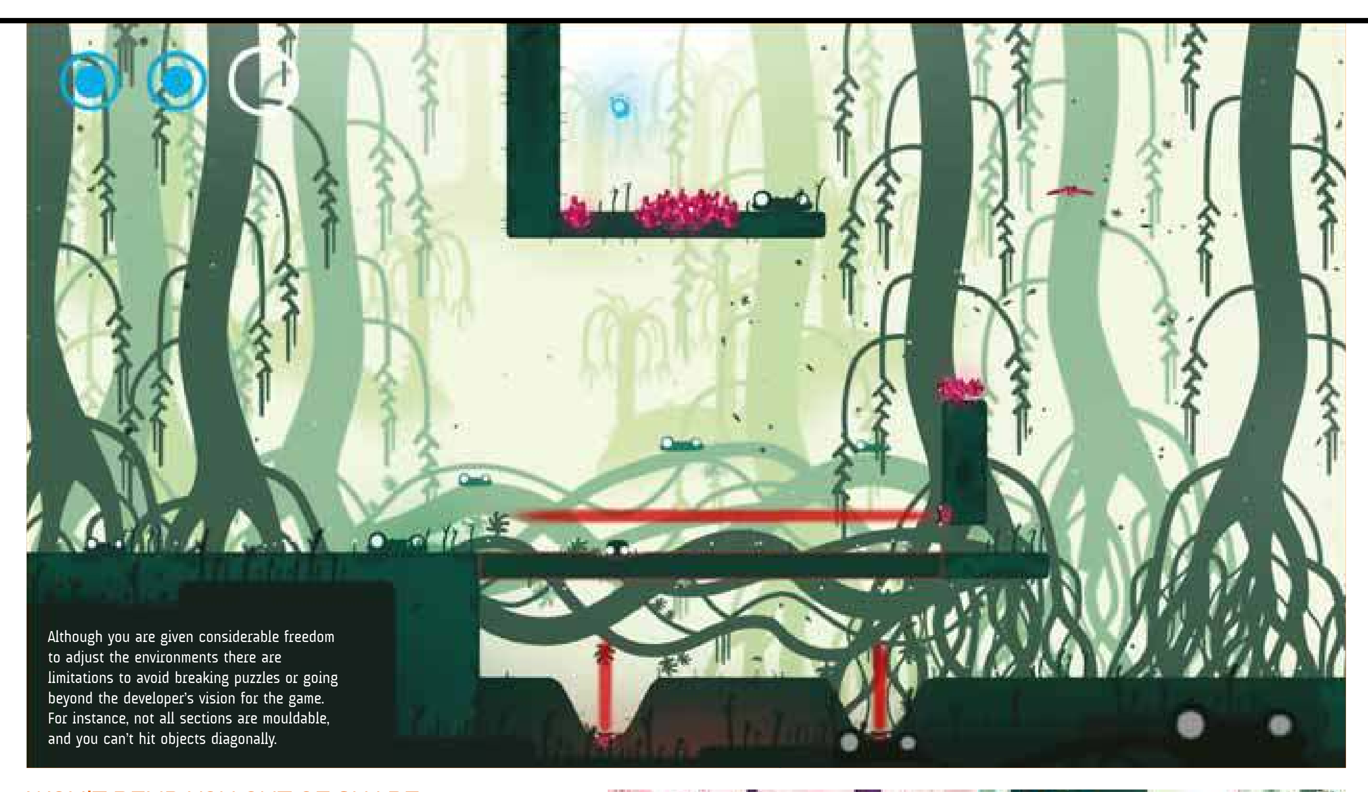
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

QUIRK THAT WORKS: *Donut County* is probably styled in such a way that some may find it a little too hipster or knowing to get into, but that attitude pervades the whole game, from the art style to the music and we really enjoyed it.



GREAT CONCEPT, SOLID EXECUTION



Although you are given considerable freedom to adjust the environments there are limitations to avoid breaking puzzles or going beyond the developer's vision for the game. For instance, not all sections are mouldable, and you can't hit objects diagonally.

WON'T BEND YOU OUT OF SHAPE

Semblance

Ordinarily, puzzle platformers consist of traversing through locations by clambering a pattern of predetermined ledges. *Semblance*, however, offers a much more intriguing and unorthodox approach to the genre that sees you change the very nature of your environment in order to progress.

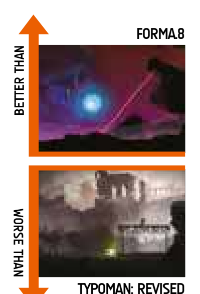
Taking control of a quaint little blob, you roam around in a mysterious and minimalist world that's best described as a playdough-filled funhouse. Your limited repertoire of moves consists of running, jumping and performing a burst ability to manipulate the many walls and platforms of this malleable world to assist your progress.

Bashing into your surroundings allows you to create your own solutions to puzzles. For instance, if you need to get higher you can simply knock against the bottom of a platform to create a higher section from which to soar from. If a corridor is blocked by a patrolling enemy you can cunningly carve out a nook to hide in until the coast is clear.

The stark narrative sees our squidgy protagonist on a quest to combat a crystalline matter that has infected this soft, squashy forest that's home to all manner of curious and charming creatures. Events are told using child-like drawings on cave walls.

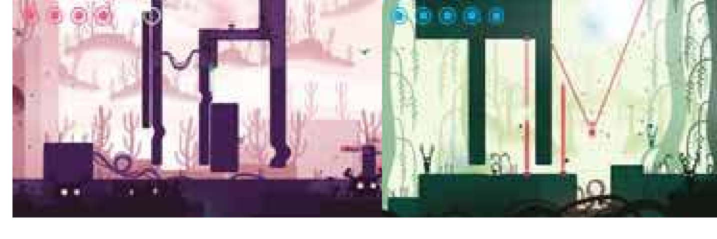
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Switch
ORIGIN: South Africa
PUBLISHER: Good Shepherd Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Nyamakop
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 8/7, 2.0 GHz CPU (Dual Core recommended), 1 GB RAM, ATi Radeon HD 2400 or NVIDIA GeForce 7600 or better, Version 9.0c, 2,700 MB HDD, DirectX 9.0c compatible sound card
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BETTER THAN: FORMA.8

WORSE THAN: TYPOMAN: REVISED



With no dialogue or explanation, the onus is on the player to decipher the meaning of these illustrations, but it's all a bit vague and sporadic to really feel all that affecting.

The mechanics and design of the levels are incredibly user-friendly; you can reset any objects you're beside with a single button press, and the environment doesn't undo your changes should your little blob meet its demise at the hands of a laser or sharp object. The objective of each area is to collect coloured orbs to remove the contamination in that section. You're free to explore the world and attempt puzzles in any order you wish, allowing you to skip sections and come back later. This negates the frustration that comes with being unable to solve a particularly complex conundrum, and they do get considerably more convoluted, particularly when elements like bouncy platforms are introduced during the game's latter half.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MAKING HISTORY: *Semblance* is the first South African-developed game to ever make its way to a Nintendo platform. It started out as a final-year university project at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2015.

As well as testing your ability to engage in some intensive lateral thinking, *Semblance* also proves to be a surprisingly demanding platformer, requiring some fast finger work after you've manipulated the environment to your desired design. Unfortunately there are a few niggles; your blob's movement is slightly too fast, and the controls are a tad fiddly for the level of precession that's often required. With such a great principle mechanic, it would have been nice to see some extra areas and puzzles to further explore the potential of *Semblance*'s extremely inventive core concept. Nonetheless, it's an incredibly inventive and engaging freeform experience that is highly enjoyable for the two to three hours that it takes to complete.

VERDICT 7/10
A DELIGHTFUL RESHAPING OF THE PUZZLE PLATFORMER

NORSE TIME TO LOSE

The Banner Saga 3

After four years, three games, and hundreds of thousands of Kickstarter dollars, the saga has come to an end. And, frankly, it's hard to say if *The Banner Saga 3* ties things up well or not – not because it's a lacking ending (like that other famous gaming trilogy Mass Effect), but because you, the player, have been making decisions and changing the world – and story – around you for three games now. It might not be a satisfactory ending to it all, but however it goes, it's all down to how you played, and the decisions you made. And that, we have to say, is satisfactory in and of itself.

We'd expect most of you to be familiar with the general setup of The Banner Saga games, but for the brave few curious ones among you: it's a turn-based strategy game in the ilk of *XCOM* all the way back to titles like *Advance Wars* or *Vandal Hearts*. You move on a grid-based map; you have a turn with an optional move and a second, also optional, action; there's a general rock-paper-scissors approach to combat; it can be overwhelming at times; one false move early on and you can ruin your entire encounter; when you get into the swing of things the only upset to the rhythm is the appearance of overpowered one-off boss fights. That kind of thing.



Above: Units have armour and health, with the former impacting how effective attacks on the latter are. Top tip: weaken the armour first – while it takes longer, therefore putting your party more at risk, it pays off eventually. Right: You will spend a lot of your time in *The Banner Saga 3* conversing with members of your party, enemies, allies and everyone else in between. Decisions made in these moments matter, so you need to pay attention.

WHAT SETS THE BANNER SAGA 3 APART FROM ITS CONTEMPORARIES IS THE SETTING AND STORY

What sets *The Banner Saga 3* apart from its contemporaries – notwithstanding the two games in the same series – is the setting and story. The game takes place in a world of Nordic mythology, riddled with ice and snow, Vikings and aggressive axe-work. This being the third game – and a direct, to-the-minute, continuation of the last – the story begins in a progressed state. The world is being taken over by a dark, unknown force. People are dying. Half of your party heads to the one remaining safe haven, the other heads into the darkness. And from there on it doesn't get much happier.

You'll get a good idea of just how unhappy things – and people – are in *The Banner Saga 3* through the extended periods between encounters. In these you're left to make your way through the story as it's presented, watching your party members interact (and bicker), and making decisions as to how things progress, from the perspective of one of the two main characters you play as through the game. Decisions impact things as you'd expect, with immediate aftermaths playing out in a suitably satisfying fashion. It's when decisions from hours – entire games – ago come back and bite you in the backside that you realise how special the whole thing is.

That feeling doesn't bleed over into combat, sadly, though what you're presented with is a perfectly enjoyable experience. Before a fight you set up your party, made from the motley crew of Vikings, giants and other less-than-human individuals. Perks and powers are assigned, with a new feature this time around coming in the shape of heroic titles – more impactful perks unlocked by levelling up a character a certain amount, which can only be assigned once, ever, to a character. You can't have two 'Monster Killers' running around the battlefields, after all – the saga would get a bit muddled up.

Trinkets assigned and party finalised, battle commences – initially exciting and overwhelming, it feels like the precise battle for survival it's supposed to be. Your party is outnumbered and on the back foot, and it takes care and attention to make it through a skirmish without losing a number of your team and having them out of action for an oh-so-valuable length of time. This is *The Banner Saga 3* at its best, when even veterans feel like it's at least a little bit new – a little bit more *vital* than it ultimately ends up being.

That's not to say it's dull, or rote, or formulaic – at least in the most part. No, *The Banner Saga 3*'s combat is fun and engaging enough. It's just… *lacking*. Lacking that oomph, that *need* to soldier on, to scrape by, to act as desperate as the situation is.

DETAILS

- **FORMAT:** PC
- **OTHER FORMATS:** PS4, Xbox One, Switch
- **ORIGIN:** US
- **PUBLISHER:** Versus Evil
- **DEVELOPER:** Stoic
- **PRICE:** £19.99
- **RELEASE:** Out now
- **PLAYERS:** 1
- **MINIMUM SPEC:** Dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, 4GB HDD space
- **ONLINE REVIEWED:** N/A



CAVEATS

One new feature to fights in *The Banner Saga 3* is a time limit. Such a simple, otherwise unspectacular addition, but one that adds layers to the existing template. Put simply, you have to deal with all the opponents on the battlefield before the turn counter runs out – fail, and more enemies arrive, and things continue to be difficult. Succeed, and you earn brief respite, allowing you to switch out injured party members for healthy ones in reserve and, should you so choose, to carry on the fight. Win against all the waves, and you bag an item. Or, of course, you can quit and run off which… isn't that bad an idea a lot of the time. It still falls in the same traps as the rest of the game, with a lack of urgency even with a time limit. But it's a great new caveat to fights all the same.



FAQs

Q. IMPOSSIBLY DIFFICULT?
Not at all – in fact, at times it's surprisingly non-challenging. That said, you can't go about things without a care in the world. You will lose.

Q. PERMADEATH?
Not from battles, that's just injury. In the story, however, it's a whole other… story.

Q. WILL THERE BE A FOURTH?
We don't want to say anything for certain, but it's highly unlikely you'll be seeing a Kickstarter for The Banner Saga 4.

Below: Sometimes there is respite in the unrelenting grimness of *The Banner Saga 3*, but as soon as you click on any portrait shown, like here, the world of hurt will recommence.



After you get used to it as a newcomer or reacquainted as a veteran, combat is just another thing to do. There are times when a specific stipulation mixes things up, or when a plan comes together and your enemy's biggest and baddest lands itself in the middle of a well-placed trap, or when you walk it with a clean sweep. That's fun. That's good. But it doesn't come often enough; while the world may well be on the verge of ending, it doesn't feel like there's any real importance to many of the fights.

Treated in isolation, we might not be so warm towards *The Banner Saga 3*. It maintains some of the issues from earlier entries to the series, and it doesn't offer as deep or engaging a strategic game as genre stablemates like *XCOM 2*. But this game is a part of something we don't see much of in gaming: a contained trilogy, with a story running throughout, that gets satisfactorily rounded up at the end of it all. Well, depending on the decisions you've made, that is.

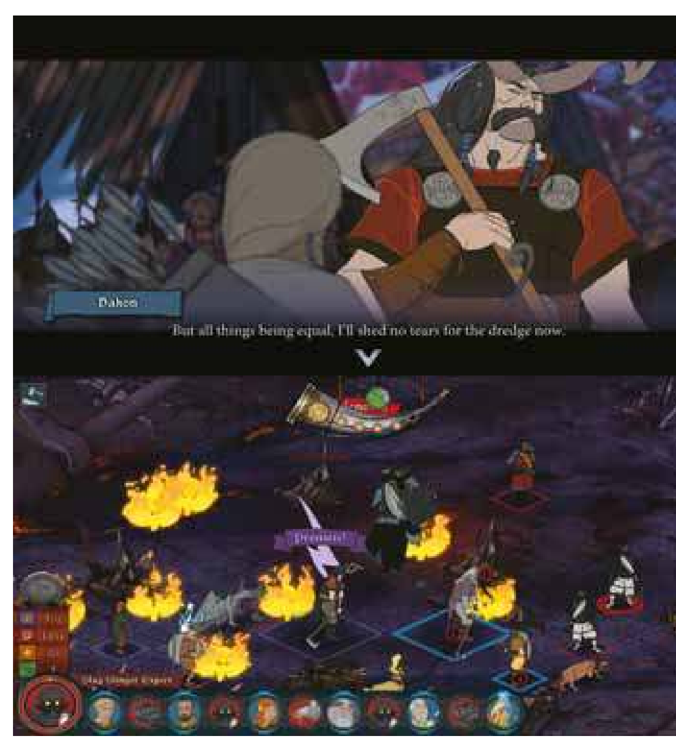
And so, while it might not be part of the elite when approached devoid of context, *The Banner Saga 3* – the Banner trilogy – is lifted into the upper echelons thanks not to its individual content, but the content of the whole package. It's fun to play on its own, and there will be plenty who don't feel the need, or have no desire, to play through three games. They're wrong, but that's fine.

Play *The Banner Saga*, play *The Banner Saga 2*, then play *The Banner Saga 3*. Bring your decisions with you, see how seemingly minor choices snowball into something far greater as the trilogy comes to its conclusion, and enjoy one of the best indie series in recent memory.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ICY: There really aren't too many games set around Nordic/Icelandic mythology, and *The Banner Saga 3* stands out just as much as its predecessors as a result of its setting.

VERDICT 7/10
NOT A GLORIOUS END, BUT A GREAT PACKAGE



Below: Stumbling across a powerful weapon combination causes a surge of immediate elation, which only heightens the disappointment when you lose it minutes later after failing to dodge out of a familiar attack from an enemy. Victory is hard won and often fleeting in *Dead Cells*.





Dead Cells

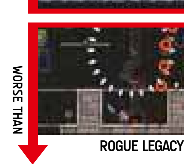
DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Motion Twin
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £21.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

CHASM





ROGUE LEGACY

WORSE THAN

It doesn't click until you first get your backside kicked, until an hour of incremental progress is wiped away in an instant. Between the tears forming in your eyes you see your cells shower down around your crumpled corpse alongside the mess of rare blueprints that you procured on your journey; you linger on the knowledge that you were just minutes from a safe house, an area where you could have cashed all of this in for a future run, and hang your head. The enemy that bested you a taunting figure as the game fades to black, thrusting you back to its opening area unburdened of the weapons and skill upgrades you collected through a labyrinth of procedurally-generated themed areas. You clench your fists, breathe deep, and set out to do it all over again. The larger your loss the more determined you become to do better, a twisted form of encouragement if we've ever seen one.

Dead Cells is a roguelike that manages to mitigate the frustrations that are inherent to the genre. It does this by implementing a refreshing approach to combat and progression, painting all of its action across an impressively diverse procedural generation system. It might just be one of the best roguelikes we've seen this side of *Rogue Legacy*.

This is common parlance when discussing videogames of this ilk, but its worth repeating. *Dead Cells* is one of those games that's easy enough to pick up but ultimately difficult to master. Its controls are simple, yet precise; learning how best to combine your limited jump and roll capabilities to avoid taking damage is all part of the fun, particularly as more difficult and diverse enemy types are introduced across the various biomes. The combat system too seems simple enough, but it's unbelievably flexible too; with weapon drops randomised, you are left to build a loadout on the run, doing the best with what you find. It makes every run in *Dead Cells* feel fresh and exciting. Find that you made it further than ever before with a particular combination of weapons? Tough luck, because the chance of that exact combination showing up for your next pass is slim to none.

Dead Cells is a game of experimentation and improvisation. You learn something new every time that you die – of the world, the enemies, the weapons and your capabilities. How you implement those lessons into your next run is never overtly obvious, but you feel the sense of improvement and progression ever so slightly. It's empowering and it's intoxicating. But that's *Dead Cells* all over; it might not present much in the way of new ideas, but it's able to present those that it does regurgitate in an impressively concise and dynamic manner. Which is more than can be said of most of the roguelikes to appear this generation.

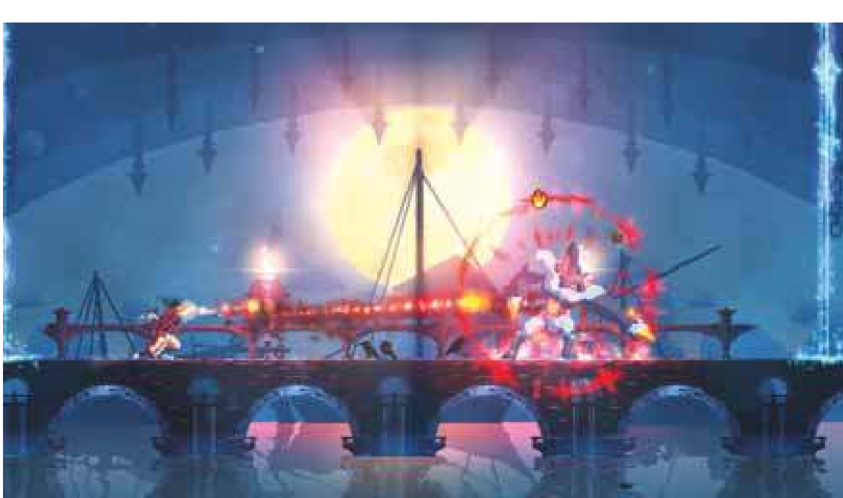
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

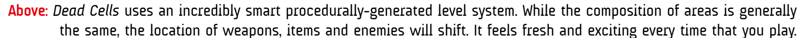
DAILY CHALLENGES: The addition of timed daily challenges only helps push you into the mindset of speedrunning, a tactic that will help you get far in *Dead Cells*.

VERDICT 8/10

INCREDIBLY PUNISHING, IMPOSSIBLE TO PUT DOWN







Above: *Dead Cells* uses an incredibly smart procedurally-generated level system. While the composition of areas is generally the same, the location of weapons, items and enemies will shift. It feels fresh and exciting every time that you play.

THE FUTURE THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARSEHOLE

State Of Mind





Above: AR provides information on everyone and everything in the world of *State Of Mind*. It's a future that Richard has impotently been rallying against in his work as a journalist, leading to him being branded by some as a luddite.

Cyberpunk is a genre full of clichés, and *State Of Mind* has all of them: neon lights, corporate conspiracies, mohawk-sporting punks, AIs, brutal inequality, and the rest. Clichés they may be, but we don't mind when they're deployed this beautifully, creating a small but well-realised sci-fi future for you to explore in the shoes of a fascinatingly abrasive protagonist by the name of Richard Nolan.

Nolan is a man at crisis point. His life is breaking down around him as he recovers from the trauma of a life-threatening accident, with his wife and son leaving him, he assumes, because of the couple's marital problems. When Nolan starts trying to track his family down, however, he finds that their disappearance might be connected to a corporate plot centred around uploading minds into a virtual reality system, calling everything he thought he knew about his past and present into question.

As we've hinted, Richard is an interesting character through which to unravel the threads of this corporate conspiracy because he's a bit of an arsehole. He's grumpy, unfaithful, selfish and prone to flip out at the drop of a hat. The game ensures you see good in Richard too, but it doesn't try to justify his bad behaviour, simply accepting that people have flaws. It's a refreshingly honest approach in a medium that usually expects us to sympathise with the character we are playing as, and lends an interesting dimension to the way you experience and understand Nolan's tattered relationships.

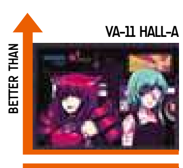
The game is presented as an investigation, Nolan chasing down leads at underground nightclubs, interrogating contacts and buying hacks to illegally access databases as he digs into the mystery behind his family's disappearance. This is somewhat misleading, as there's very little investigation on your part, save for a few simple puzzles that have you sorting through news stories for information. In reality, this is a linear, story-based thriller that pushes you swiftly from one scene to the next. That's no bad thing – the game's quick pacing keeps you engaged in the story and you always feel like there's a revelation around the next corner. However, the game would have perhaps been better served by being honest about what it is and cutting down on the busywork puzzles, or honing in on the investigation aspect and trusting us with some more detective work.

It's difficult to tell you much more about *State Of Mind* without spoiling it. All we can say is that there are some powerful moments that deal with real-life issues alongside some well-considered, if unoriginal, speculation on how unevenly distributed technology could lead us to dystopia. The focus isn't always in the right place, with some of the more intriguing aspects of the game's characters and story left underexplored, this is still a fun, well-realised genre thriller.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One, Switch
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Daedalic Entertainment
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £25.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Win 7 32bit, Processor: 2.8 Ghz Dual Core CPU, Graphics: NVIDIA GeForce 560 / AMD Radeon 7770 or similar, Storage: 23GB.
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
VA-11 HALL-A



WORSE THAN
THE RED STRINGS CLUB

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DETECTIVE DUO: For story reasons we won't spoil, there is a character switching mechanic in this game that sees you swapping information back and forth between characters with unique perspectives.


VERDICT 7/10
A WORTHWHILE, IF UNSPECTACULAR, CYBERPUNK THRILLER

Below: Behind the grumpy face of protagonist Richard Nolan, there's a *Neuromancer* reference to be spotted in the background here for cyberpunk aficionados.





IT'S TIME TO DON THE MASK AND BONE UP ON YOUR LUCHADOR MOVES

Guacamelee! 2

Sequels are often a tricky business. For one, how do you add to an already complete entry? And, most importantly, how do you justify having to relearn all of your old moves from the last game?

Amnesia's a bit overdone and Yakuza's ol' jail time shuffle really only works for that series. No, Guacamelee! is far more practically minded. Yes, Guacamelee! has in some ways gone the way of the 'fighty dad game' but don't fret, it's holding on to the goofy tone of the original.

Seven years of fatherhood have not been kind to former luchador Juan Aguacate's body. Miraculously he still fits into his championship belt but not without a belly full of ice cream looming over the top of it. That all changes when darkest timeline doubles of his friends cross interdimensional lines to seek his help. For you see, unfortunately their Juan did not survive the last game's big bad showdown and they're finding themselves short handed in the midst of the latest crisis.

From there you're once again chopping and changing between the land of the living and the dead… sometimes alternatively as a chicken. Much like its predecessor, this is all accompanied by bright cartoon visuals, a soundtrack that combines a strong brass section with a slice of chiptune, both borrowing heavily from traditional Mexican culture and a story steeped in Mexican folklore.

In this Metroidvania brawler hybrid, it's still a ton of fun battering baddies luchador style and lobbing them into each other, into walls, and particularly into firey or spikey pits meant to facilitate your own demise. You're served up new moves reasonably regularly and enemies will bring new defences with

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: DrinkBox Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FAQs

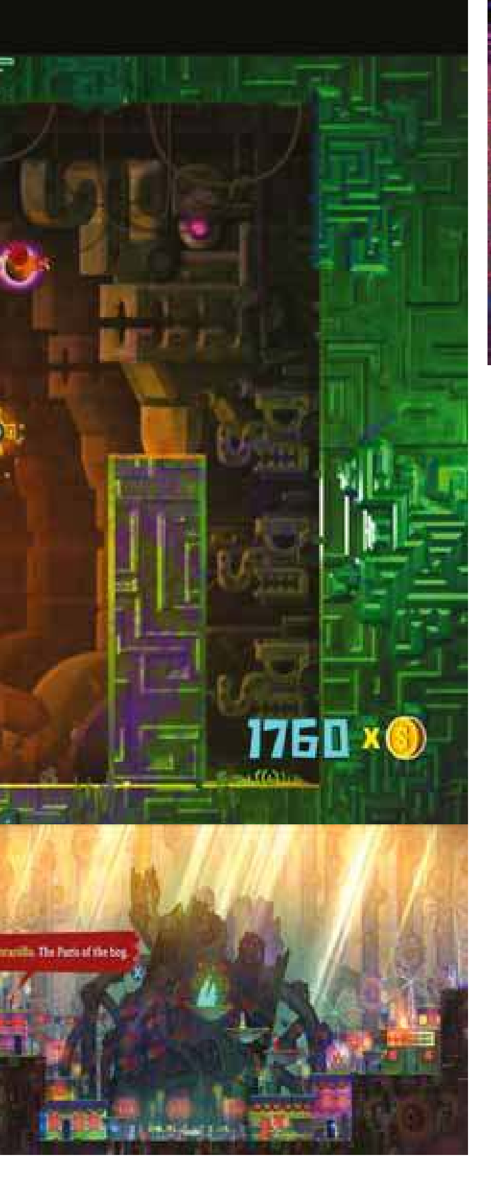
Q. JUANNY DADDY?
Yup! The sequel treats the last game's good ending as canonical, with Juan and El Presidente's Daughter uniting in the land of the living, going on to get married and start a family.

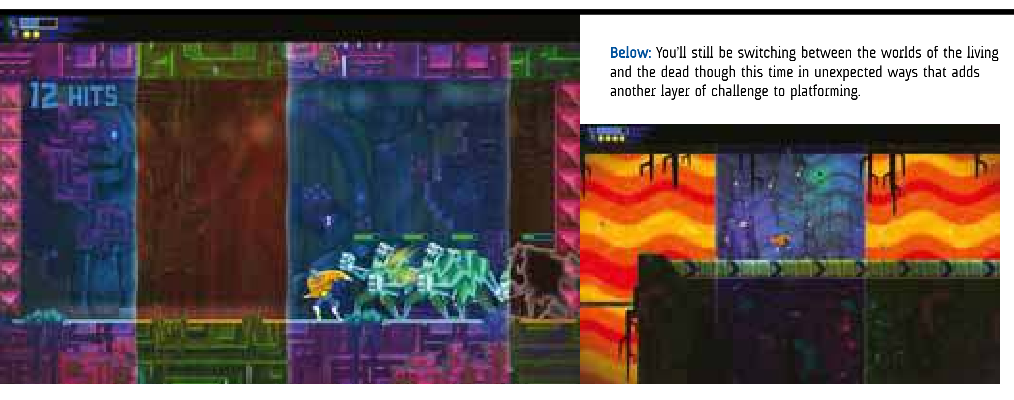
Q. BUT AM I STILL PUNCHING SKELETONS?
Yes, though it isn't because your young family is directly imperilled. There's a new group of big bads in town but they're after some godly guacamole.

Q. IS IT SILLY?
Very. From puns to pop culture references to its tasty MacGuffin, the first game's sense of humour returns in full force.



THREE HOURS IN YOU'LL BE SLICKLY PUNCHING THROUGH THE AIR, THROUGH BLOCKADES AND THROUGH ENEMIES, FREQUENTLY IN QUICK SUCCESSION



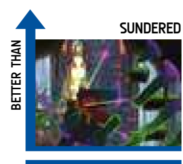


Below: You'll still be switching between the worlds of the living and the dead though this time in unexpected ways that adds another layer of challenge to platforming.

Above: There's only one way to stop these skeletons from fighting: with your fists. With teachers scattered around the map and plenty of moves to buy, you're well equipped for the task.

BETTER THAN

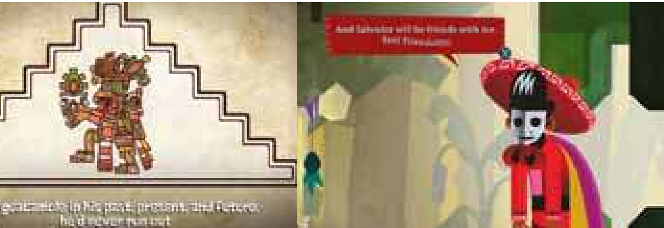
SUNDERED





WORSE THAN

HOLLOW KNIGHT



GRANDMASTER AND GRASSHOPPER

There are a number of new fighting trainers scattered throughout hub areas. Once you've formally introduced yourself, you can consult them from the pause menu and pay them your hard fought for gold for just a little bit of their expertise. Each one is associated with a special move you'll learn no matter what, offering more moves based around that specialism. This gives you a number of options to cultivate your own fighting style or generally make things a little easier, like allowing Juan to recover from being knocked down quicker. It's well worth investing in though be warned, it can get a little pricey. These are professionals you're dealing with, after all.

them that these powers are most apt to break through. Areas can feel sprawling but seldom overwhelming thanks to generous checkpoints, helped also by a linear, well sign-posted path of progression through interlinked areas.

As you explore, you're given plenty of new ways to traverse maps from wall hooks to jumps and powerful punches to access new areas. Managing enemies and platforms that exist between worlds is still a compelling gimmick and makes for some especially fiendish screens. Make no bones about it, the sequel kicks this up a notch with stages that have rolling waves of alternate worlds. These in particular make for some of the more challenging and rewarding areas alongside the golden chicken temples, which are well worth scratching around for.

Boss fights and the intermittent challenges you stumble upon as you explore are where you really see the best of both worlds though. The first boss proper, El Muñeco, is a chicken fancying magician. Saying nothing of his introduction throughout the first temple or the charming bond he shares with his assistant chicks, facing off against this fellow masked man unites and tests a number of your new-found skills in a hugely enjoyable way. It's fights like these and the combat challenges you'll find scattered throughout the map and in Flame Face's bar that are the most demanding.

The platforming challenges, that dangle the spoils of either added stamina or health to tempt you, are by far the most frustrating, giving way to many exasperated cries of, "Oh my goodness, this is so silly and totally not worth it…" right before you go in for another doomed attempt. Though some mandatory sections are especially finicky and will leave you thanking the great guac gods for their generous checkpointing.

It's after completing this first temple that *Guacamelee! 2* reveals its true depths. After easing you in gently, this follow up unites the two halves of the hybrid in pleasing, though moreso frustrating, ways. Now you may be forgiven for thinking that combat isn't especially complex or nuanced at first glance but two of the special punches you earn early on also act as a double jump. Three hours in you'll be slickly punching through the air, through blockades and through enemies, frequently in quick succession. It looks cool but feels even better.

To get to the darkest timeline, you'll warp through a fair few alternate dimensions sending up side scrollers from years past. *Guacamelee! 2* starts as it means to go on with its reference-heavy, though ultimately endearing, sense of humour. Though that's not even getting into the puns; an early temple features a pretty notable central figure who wastes no opportunity in attempting to tickle your funny bone. It's just self-aware enough to not be entirely cloying though you may still feel a little more world weary by the end of it, especially as so much of the game will plague fans of the original with a persistent sense of déjà vu.

Those fans may well have been beset by that same sense of overwhelming familiarity throughout this entire review and the truth of the matter is, while still excellent, it is more of the same in this sequel.

Beyond a continuation of the story and particularly shiny presentation, there's little else that's truly new here or innovates on that winning formula. It'll still leave a smile on your face and the echoes of a Mariachi band will take up residence in your head for weeks afterwards, but it's not going to smash through any psychopomp planes.

Much like its core gameplay gimmick, you could happily warp between either game and still have a great time.

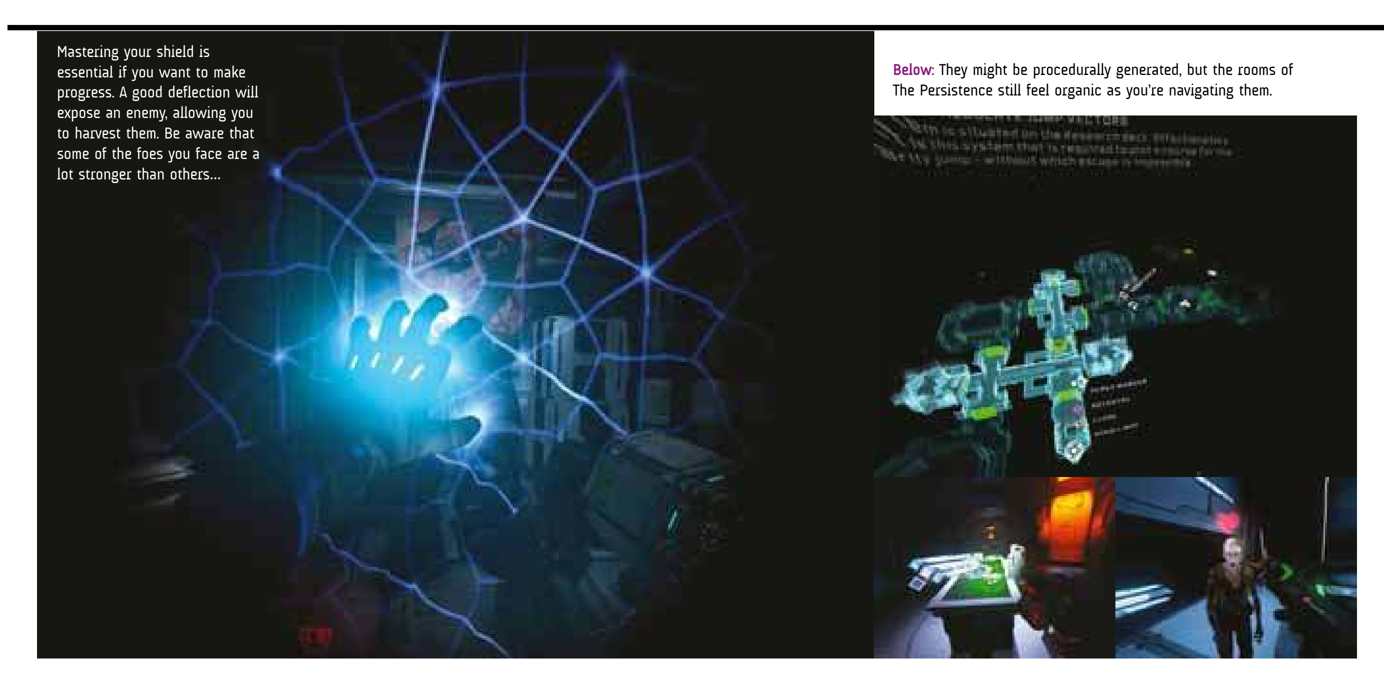
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SMASH IT UP: If it ain't broke, don't fix it… but it also can't hurt to switch things up a bit. We'd love to see enemies that react to different fighting styles and capitalise more on the new moves you can learn from the various teachers scattered around the world.


VERDICT 7/10

STILL BRINGS THE ACTION AND THE FUNNY



Mastering your shield is essential if you want to make progress. A good deflection will expose an enemy, allowing you to harvest them. Be aware that some of the foes you face are a lot stronger than others...

Below: They might be procedurally generated, but the rooms of The Persistence still feel organic as you're navigating them.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED, DIE, DIE AGAIN

The Persistence

Horror has already proven that it's perfect for the VR medium and it's never been more apparent than when you're walking through the ever-changing rooms of *The Persistence*. Walk those halls you must, though, as it's your job as Zimri Eder to get the doomed spaceship The Persistence back online, a task that would be much easier to undertake if you hadn't just been killed. Luckily for you, The Persistence ship is equipped with the latest clone technology and its engineer, Serena Karim, has cloned you. It's an interesting concept and ties in brilliantly to the core rogue-like mechanics that form the heart of Firesprite's game. There are times when Zimri is just as frustrated as you are, letting out expletives or having to be reassured by Serena after dying for the umpteenth time.

For the most part though those deaths are your own fault, for like the best rouge-likes it's typically your own greed that's just as much your downfall as the twisted clones that prowl the ship's four decks. You'll constantly push your luck, though, as in addition to those deadly hidden monsters, every room and walkway contains numerous extra items that can be picked up and used to ensure you live that little bit longer, with three currencies found at the heart of Firesprite's adventure: Stem cells, FAB chips and Erebus tokens. Numerous Fabricators are found throughout the ship, which will generate all sorts of useful items and weaponry – providing of course that you have the correct currency for them – and you can also use limited teleporting and the heightened senses found in your suit to further stay ahead of your enemies. When death comes you lose all your hard-earned items but keep all your currency, allowing you to then upgrade your clone's body and buy numerous skills that affect everything from your suit's stealth power, to the range of the base Harvester weapon that you use to extract the stem cells of your unfortunate shipmates. Explore deep enough and you'll even find other crew members that Zimri can be transplanted into in order to stand a better chance of achieving her core objectives.

Every death also resets the layout of the ship, meaning no two games are ever the same. While it can be a slog to revisit those early stages, a useful key can be found in supply crates that let you instantly jump to later levels. Firesprite's game design shifts as much as its decks do and you'll find the later hours of *The Persistence* becoming as much an FPS as it is an outright horror game. It's incredibly satisfying when you're (relatively) tooled up and can unleash fury on the enemies you were actively avoiding a few lives earlier.

Exceptionally atmospheric and with an accomplished control system that will suit all levels of VR users, *The Persistence* really is something special. It will occasionally spit out impossibly unfair combinations and does take a while to grow on you, but when it does *The Persistence* digs deep and doesn't let go.

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

MULTIPLAYER: While an accompanying app (we were unable to test) allows a second player to loosely interact with you, we'd love to explore the creepy corridors with an actual friend.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVR
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Firesprite
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

HERE THEY LIE

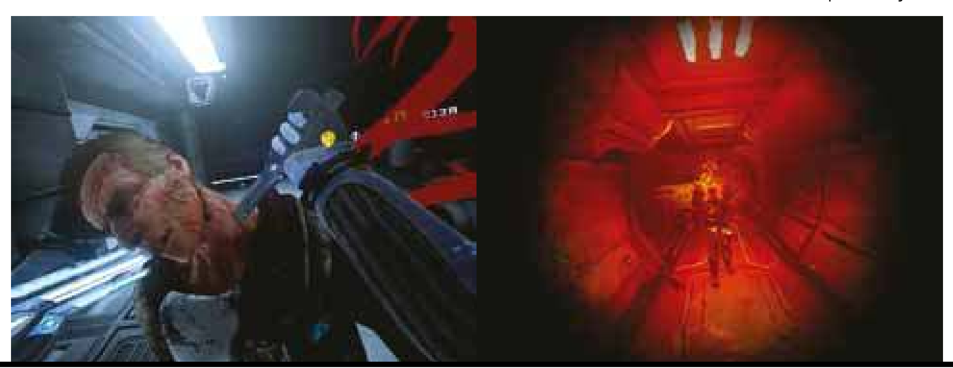


WORSE THAN



RESIDENT EVIL VII

Below: Enemies come in all shapes and forms, and this one is particularly dangerous, so keep well away.



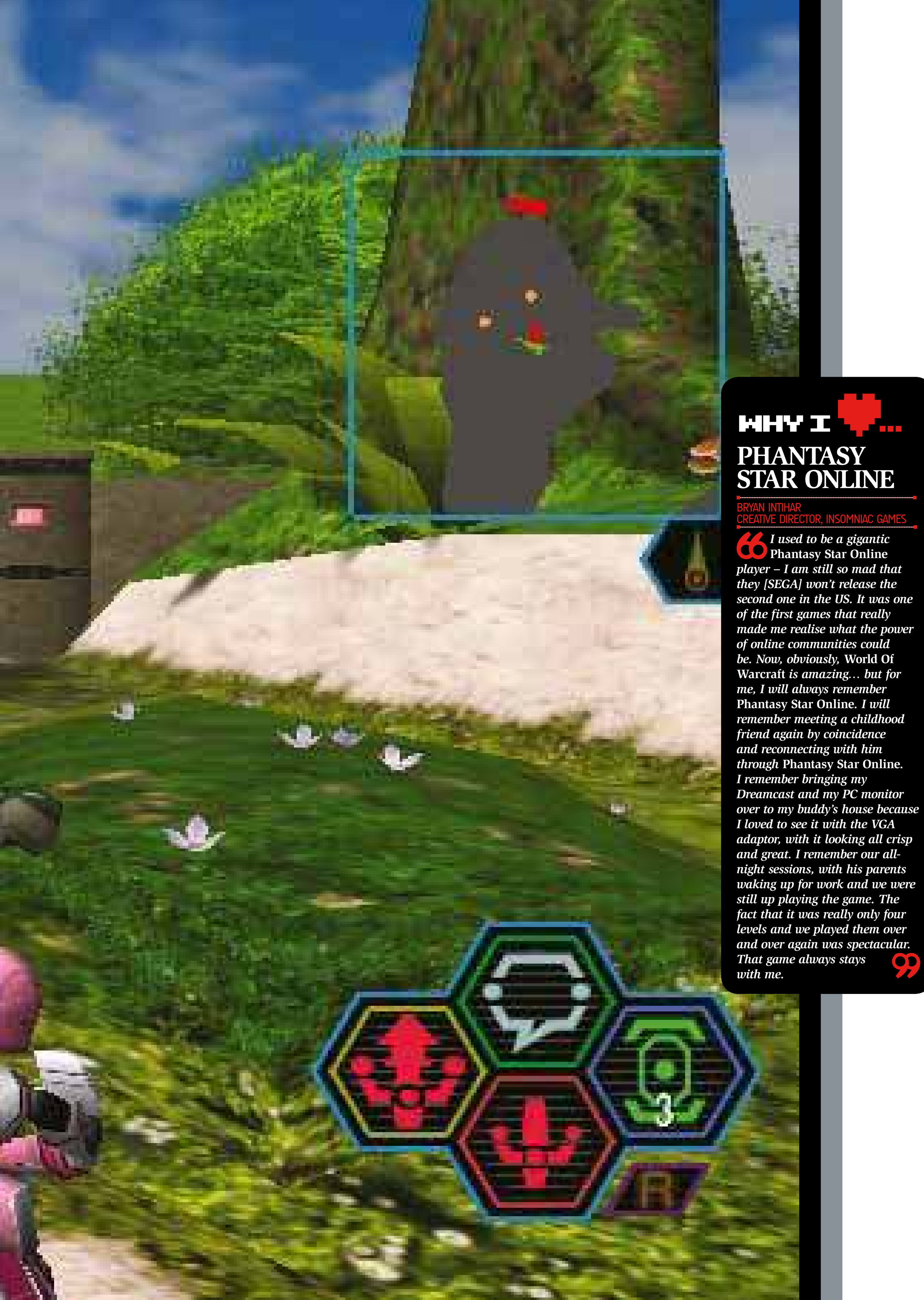
VERDICT 8/10

A CLEVER GENRE MIX AND ESSENTIAL VR EXPERIENCE



"It was one of the first games that really made me realise what the power of online communities could be"

BRYAN INTIHAR CREATIVE DIRECTOR, INSOMNIAC GAMES



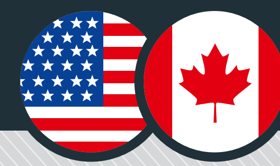
WHY I ♥...

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

BRYAN INTIHAR
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, INSOMNIAC GAMES

"I used to be a gigantic **Phantasy Star Online** *player – I am still so mad that they [SEGA] won't release the second one in the US. It was one of the first games that really made me realise what the power of online communities could be. Now, obviously,* **World Of Warcraft** *is amazing… but for me, I will always remember* **Phantasy Star Online**. *I will remember meeting a childhood friend again by coincidence and reconnecting with him through* **Phantasy Star Online**. *I remember bringing my Dreamcast and my PC monitor over to my buddy's house because I loved to see it with the VGA adaptor, with it looking all crisp and great. I remember our all-night sessions, with his parents waking up for work and we were still up playing the game. The fact that it was really only four levels and we played them over and over again was spectacular. That game always stays with me."*

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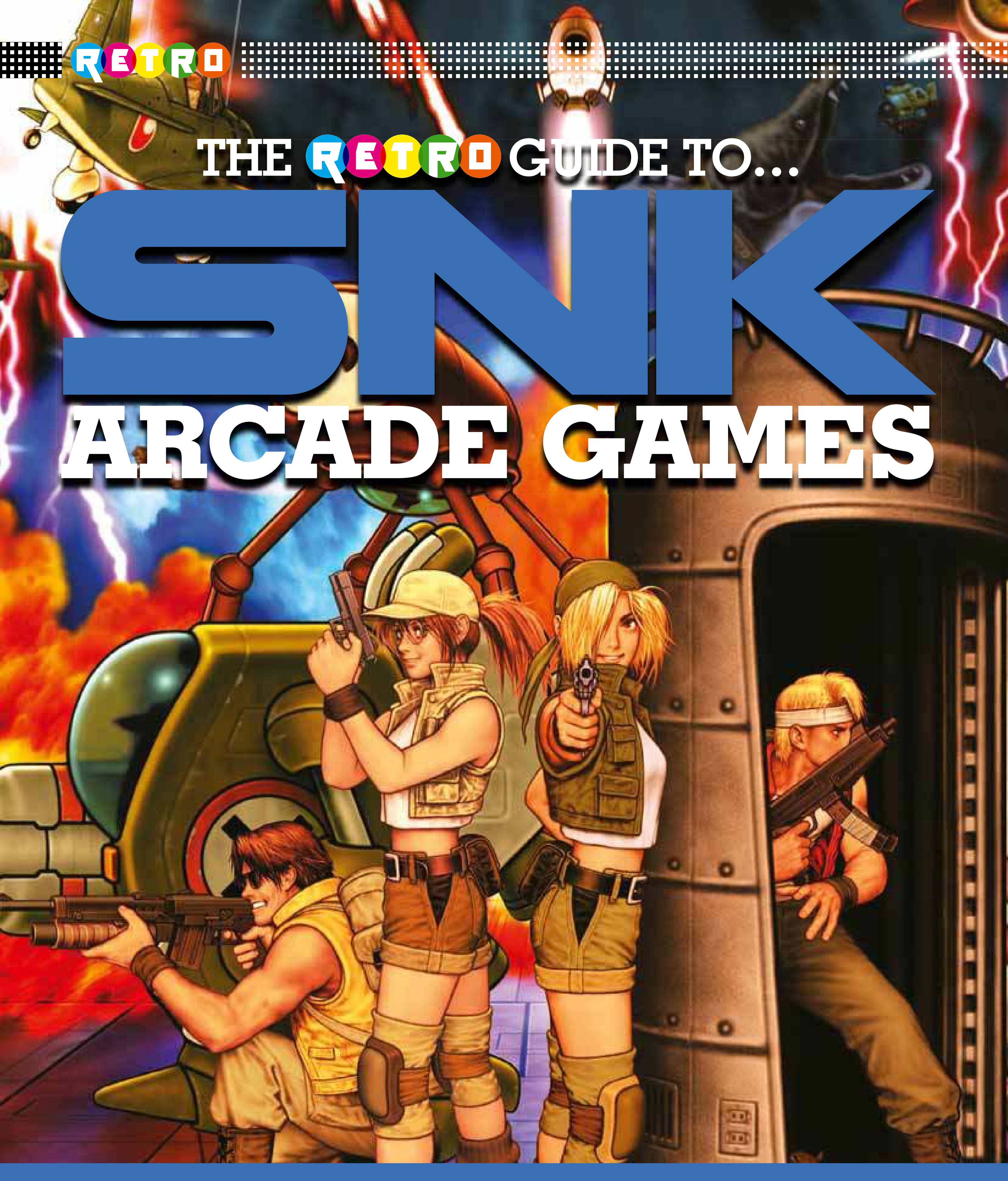
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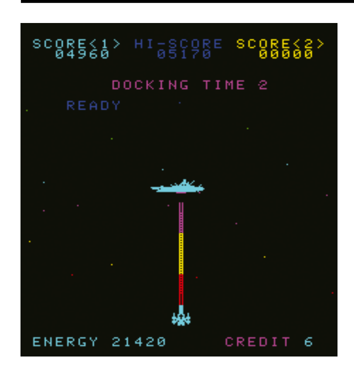
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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...
SNK ARCADE GAMES



games™ investigates the arcade games of the Japanese developer as the company celebrates its 40th anniversary

BEFORE IT STARTED releasing games on home systems, SNK was best known for its arcade games. Formed in 1973 by Eikichi Kawasaki, it was initially known as Shin Nihon Kikaku, a name it held until it was officially changed to SNK in 1986. During the company's early years it released a variety of interesting games, and would publish across a number of different genres, including maze games and shoot-'em-ups. As it continued to make a name for itself in the west, publishers of home systems began to take notice, eventually securing licences for several of the company's titles, most notably *Ikari Warriors*, *Athena*, *Psycho Soldier* and *Guerrilla Wars*. For many, it's the Nineties where SNK truly came alive thanks to its Neo-Geo technology, which ensured its (expensive) home console and games were identical to its arcade counterparts. Join us, then, as we look back at those early days of the company. How many of the following do you remember?





OZMA WARS

1979

The success of *Space Invaders* in 1978 saw the shoot-'em-up genre explode, with developers all eager to get in on the action. SNK was no different, delivering this interesting take on the genre and marking itself as a developer to keep an eye on. Unlike many of its peers, *Ozma Wars* starts with you docking your ship and trying to earn as much additional energy as possible. You must then navigate the treacherous levels, managing your dwindling supply of energy and avoiding enemy ships and bullets (which will cause your levels to drop significantly). A solid little shooter let down by annoyingly piercing sound effects.





FANTASY

1981

Many aren't aware of *Fantasy*, but it's a staggeringly great game that contains all sorts of play mechanics and some truly impressive visuals. Like *Donkey Kong*, it features a damsel in distress, and feels extremely cinematic. It sports far more varied gameplay, though. One stage has you trying to land on a pirate ship, and another sees you facing off against fearsome warriors, while others have you running through a jungle or navigating the skies in a hot air balloon until you've covered a set amount of distance. Well-paced and with great graphics, it's a shame it never appeared on any home systems at the time. Interestingly, two of its levels feature Lipps Inc's Funky Town, which may explain why it has never turned up on any of SNK's arcade compilations.

LASSO

1982

SNK tried its hand at all sorts of inventive games during the early Eighties, and *Lasso* is one such example. As its name suggests, the aim is to play a cowboy and round up a set amount of animals on each stage, or defeat the wolves attacking them. The lassoing itself takes a while to master, as pressing the fire button sends out a rope that will continue to extend until you press the button again to loop it, which catches anything inside. It's a little fiddly at first, but once you get used to the mechanics it turns into a very satisfying game. A port was released for the TI-99 in 1984.



T.A.N.K.

1981

This decent little top-down shooter is notable because it marks the first ever appearance of Ralf Jones, the hero of *Ikari Warriors*. It predates the use of rotary sticks a good year before *Ikari*, meaning it's possible to fire independently of the direction you're moving it. While it wasn't a huge success, there was enough interest for Ocean Software to port it to various home systems.





IKARI WARRIORS

1986

Ikari Warriors was one of SNK's biggest hits during the mid Eighties, and was ported to countless home systems. While it clearly takes influence from Capcom's earlier run-and-gun *Commando*, *Ikari* also references *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, with its two stars, Ralf and Clarke, looking suspiciously like Sylvester Stallone's iconic character. Other differences from *Commando* include the ability to move and shoot in different directions (thanks to the use of rotary joysticks) and the option to jump into tanks at certain parts of the game, allowing for even more carnage. Numerous sequels followed, with the last, *Ikari III: The Rescue*, appearing in 1989.









PREHISTORIC ISLE IN 1930

1989

■ Despite being a rather epic blaster, SNK's dinosaur-themed shooter never received a home release. It's a shame, because it's really fantastic stuff thanks to absolutely gigantic boss dinosaurs, gorgeously vibrant visuals and a really neat firing mechanic. Shooting down eggs reveals power-ups that will attach a pod to your biplane. This can then be slowly rotated around your ship, giving you distinctive firing abilities depending on where it's currently placed. It's a great mechanic to get to grips with, and adds a slice of strategy to all the reptilian mayhem. Interestingly, a sequel by the appropriate name of *Saurus* was released in 1999, but it never made the same impact as SNK's original blaster.





BEAST BUSTERS

1989

■ This on-rails shooter is notable for being the last game that SNK released in arcades before embracing its new Neo-Geo technology. The original arcade machine is designed for three players, and features mounted machine guns that enable you to take down the endless stream of zombies assaulting you. There are a number of challenging bosses that appear on each stage, with cutscenes thrown in for good measure. Two sequels appeared, one of which was an action RPG for the Neo Geo Pocket Color.

MOUNTED MACHINE GUNS ENABLE YOU TO TAKE DOWN THE ENDLESS STREAM OF ZOMBIES ASSAULTING YOU





NAM-1975

1990

■ The first game to use SNK's new Neo-Geo hardware was a solid blaster that shared many similarities with Tad Corporation's *Cabal*. Like *Cabal*, you can move your soldier along the bottom of the screen, while holding the fire button will allow you to move a cursor and mow down enemies. *NAM-1975* ups the ante by adding scrolling levels, far larger numbers of on-screen enemies, allies that will help you once they've been freed, and some truly spectacular pyrotechnics.

THE SUPER SPY

1990



■ This early Neo-Geo release is remembered for its astonishingly impressive visuals, which feature gigantic sprites and excellent animation. It's effectively a scrolling fighter that utilises a first-person viewpoint, throwing in light RPG elements for good measure. All you see of your spy are his arms, legs and weapons as he punches, kicks and shoots his way through a slew of ninjas and terrorists. Numerous doors are in the complex you fight through, which reveal characters who either offer you help in the form of handy items or give you useful bits of exposition. SNK published a similar game the following year, *Crossed Swords*, which added a fantasy theme and a useful multiplayer mode.





FATAL FURY: KING OF FIGHTERS

1991

■ *Fatal Fury* marked a big change of direction for SNK, as it was the first of several fighting franchises that the company would go on to create and publish. Created by Takashi Nishiyama, who made the original *Street Fighter*, it was intended as a spiritual successor, and as a result shares numerous similarities with Capcom's brawler. Due to the Neo-Geo's four-button layout, there are fewer options, with attacks focusing around punches, kicks and throws. One unique aspect is that fights take place across two rows, with the player able to jump between them as fights progress. Nishiyama's game would go on to spawn several sequels, and also launch *The King Of Fighters*, which would go on to become just as popular.





THRASH RALLY

1991

This fast and furious top-down racer might look rather basic for a Neo-Geo release, but it more than makes up for it during play. There are two distinct tournaments to take part in, with a variety of different vehicles to try, all of which handle brilliantly. The track design is top-notch, with lots of challenging bends and turns, while the AI always feels fair and gives you a fighting chance.



SAMURAI SHODOWN

1993

SNK's bloody brawler was unusual upon release because it focused on feudal Japan, rather than the modern cityscapes that were so popular with fighters at the time. It continues to set itself apart thanks to its fast-paced weapon-based combat, a strong variety of characters (including the gigantic Earthquake) and a nuanced combat system that allows you to perform fierce strikes that can dismember an opponent if timed correctly. Numerous sequels followed, with the most recent, *Samurai Shodown: Sen*, appearing in 2008.





SUPER SIDEKICKS 2

1994

SNK's sequel adds a number of improvements over the original game, and boasts even slicker animation and graphics. By far the biggest change to the fast-paced gameplay is the introduction of the 'Chance' mechanic, which cuts to a first-person perspective and gives you a better chance to score a goal during certain key moments of play. It's also possible to choose how your team will play at the beginning of a match, which is needed, as later opponents get increasingly tougher to beat.

CONVERTING T.A.N.K.

Gerald Weatherup discusses converting SNK's coin-op

How did you get the job of coding *Tank* for Ocean?

I was working for Choice Software in Carrickfergus, Northern Ireland at the time. The office was about 15 minutes' walk from my home. I started when I was 15 years old as a hobby summer job, and took a full-time job when I was 16. Ocean subcontracted many conversions over the years to Choice, and *Tank* came along in 1987. It took us about three to six months to do the conversion.

Did you have access to the coin-op machine during the development?

Yes, we had the coin-op, and it's what we used for reference. The graphics all came from the arcade machine. Choice owner Colin Gordon was an electronics whizz, and he was able to pull things apart. We pulled all the ROMs, downloaded the content and searched for all the graphics. We became experts at recolouring the graphics. Then it was just a matter of putting the animations together. None of the team could really draw – pushing pixels around and converting things was about our limit.

The coin-op featured a rotary controller. This must have been a challenge to replicate on the home computers?

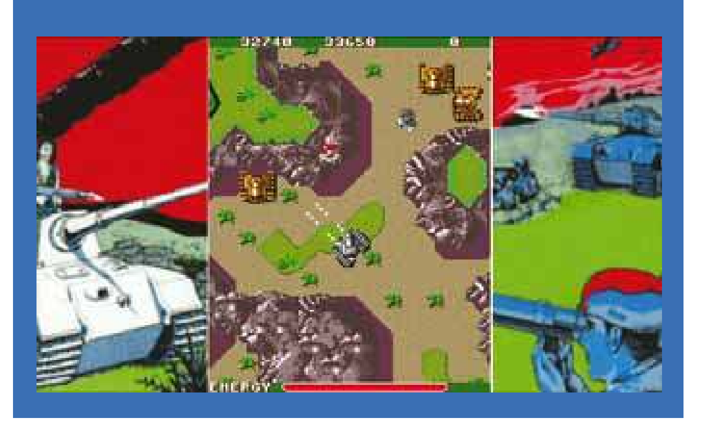
That was one of the big things that I wanted to achieve, to make the feel of the game as close as possible to the original. After trying various methods it seemed sensible and logical to use two handed-keyboard controls or a combination of joystick and keyboard.

Was it a smooth project or were there any issues that complicated things?

Tight time scales and amount of graphics to convert were the main challenges. I remember doing the graphics for both the Spectrum and Amstrad versions at the same time. I can't recall if we did the coding at the same time, but if it wasn't in tandem then it was back-to-back for sure.

The game seemed to receive a limited release, although it was included on later compilations Can you remember the reason behind this? Was it a publisher decision?

Yes, that was completely a publisher decision, Choice was only contracted to do the conversion. It was a real shame, because I thought it was a good conversion of a great game.



AN INTERVIEW WITH CYRILLE IMBERT

The CEO of DotEmu discusses its PS4 port of Windjammers



When did you first experience *Windjammers*?
Three years ago, when people started organising contests at the office. I was instantly hyped after one match!

Why choose to revisit *Windjammers*?
Windjammers is one of the best 'sports versus' games that we played. It is so simple and very deep at the same time. You instantly understand how to play, but when you start mastering it you understand that it will take a lot of effort and time to really get good. It is also fantastic to watch. All these elements make a perfect combination for today's players' expectations, especially with the esports scene. That's why we felt it was the right time to bring this awesome game back.

Why is the new version only available on PS4 and Vita?
Sony has been very supportive with us for *Windjammers*. They are fans like us, and instantly understood the potential of bringing this gem back. The Vita is also a great device for retro gaming. It just made sense in every way.

Have you added anything over the original game?
At DotEmu, we always try to stick to the original spirit of the games we work on. That's what we did with *Windjammmers*. We recreated the menus that are now in HD, but with the same Nineties pink spandex/ sunglasses spirit. But the main element we added is the fact that people will be able to compete online with ranked matches and leagues.

So, it's playable online?
Yes, and we are really trying to focus on that aspect, as we believe that *Windjammers* is a perfect fit for online competition and esports.

Why do you think the game remains so popular?
This is a great question. For ten years we have been working on really awesome licenses, like Double Dragon, R-Type and *Another World*. These games are still popular, and our adaptations encountered good success. But it has nothing to do with the hype around *Windjammers*. We have never seen that, it's crazy. But, again, *Windjammers* has everything: cool artistic direction, huge competitive spirit, fame among the fighting game community, and it is very fun to watch.



WINDJAMMERS

1994



This SNK-published sports game is effectively an updated version of *Pong*. The game is played across six different courts and gives you a set amount of time to score as many points as possible, ideally by hitting specific targeted zones in the goal. Points are also scored if your opponent fails to catch an incoming disk, meaning you'll want to constantly juggle your shots to outfox them. While only two fire buttons are used, *Windjammers* is surprisingly complex, with the player able to pull off a variety of moves, including devious curve throws. While the computer puts up a good fight, *Windjammers* really comes into its own with a second player.





PULSTAR

1995

While there are a fair few shooters on the Neo-Geo, few are as good, or as difficult, as the excellent *Pulstar*. Coded by Aicom, SNK saw *Pulstar*'s potential and quickly published it, creating the first Neo-Geo game with pre-rendered graphics on its hardware in the process. Heavily influenced by *R-Type* (it's thought that some Irem developers formed Aicom), it features a similar bio-mechanical style and the same tough difficulty. Success in *Pulstar* comes through mastering its charge weapon and knowing when best to use the main power-ups that are available. And with so many huge bosses to tackle, you're going to need to master those skills quickly, because Aicom's game doesn't take prisoners. *Pulstar*, like many other Neo-Geo games that were released for SNK's home AES console, is now insanely expensive (mint copies sell for over £2,000), meaning many dealers are now converting the MVS release, which was more plentiful.

THE KING OF FIGHTERS '96

1996

The third King Of Fighters is probably our favourite alongside '98, and still holds up today. It greatly overhauls the combat system of the earlier games by introducing an evasive roll, and also uses a double tap to quickly move across the screen and lets you judge the height and distance of jumps. Characters have been completely redrawn and animated, and many of them now feel far more varied than before, while the presentation throughout is top notch.





NEO TURF MASTERS

1996

This SNK-published game exemplifies everything that's great about the best Neo-Geo games: great graphics, stunning animation and highly satisfying game mechanics. While there are only two types of game modes on offer (Stroke Play and Match Play), both excel thanks to exceptional course design, a superb swing system and an accessible point of entry. The 72 available holes and six different golfers mean it will take you years to master it.

STAKES WINNER 2

1996

■ This Saurus-developed sequel is a big improvement on the original. While there are only three buttons to master, you'll need to rely on timing and knowing when to push your horse in order to get the most out of it, which does take practice. There are a variety of different horses to master, two continents to race across and the ability to upgrade your chosen horse's stats by taking part in minigames. A solid sequel that's easy to pick up, but difficult to master.



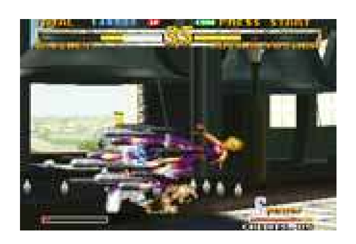


TWINKLE STAR SPRITES

1996

■ We've lost count of the hours we've wasted on this excellent competitive shooter. The aim of the game is to shoot down waves of enemies that will then be thrown across to your opponents screen. They can either attempt to shoot them back, or risk getting hit by the on-screen carnage and lose a precious heart. While there's a solid story mode, *Twinkle Star Sprites* really comes into its own with a second player. Don't expect to stay friends for long, though.





GAROU: MARK OF THE WOLVES

1999

■ The eighth Fatal Fury game is not only considered to be the best in the series, but also one of the best 2D fighting games of all time. Everything about it is near perfect, from its varied range of balanced fighters to its lush animation and beautiful backdrops. The combat engine is excellent, too, with special mention going to the Tactical Offence Position gauge and the new parry system, which both add even more strategy to an already complex engine.

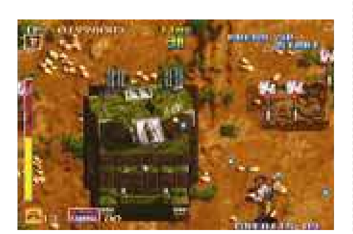
THE LAST BLADE

1997

■ Although it looks similar to *Samurai Shodown*, *The Last Blade* is a very different game. It stands apart thanks to its focus on the Bakumatsu era of Japan, and also favours tactics over the fast-paced action of the Shodown games, with its distinctive combat system focusing around its balanced 'deflect' system. In terms of aesthetics, it's stunning thanks to exquisitely drawn backdrops and incredibly animated sprites that still look incredible in motion today. A sequel arrived the following year.







SHOCK TROOPERS

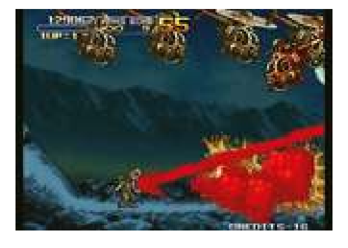
1997

■ The best way to describe *Shock Troopers* is as a steroid-fuelled take on *Commando*. Clearly inspired by Capcom's classic shooter, it's notable for its multiple routes, over-the-top weaponry, gigantic bosses and slick use of scaling. One other neat touch that sets it apart from similar games is the option to either play as a single character or choose three, swapping between their unique skills at will. A disappointing sequel arrived later in the same year.

METAL SLUG 3

2000

■ Many consider this epic run-and-gun to be the best game in the series. The animation throughout is faultless, with giant sprites that are full of expression, while there's a fantastic array of satisfying boss encounters to deal with. It introduces a large number of new Slugs to drive and adds multiple routes. Massively popular, it has been ported to countless home systems, with the most recent being Nintendo's Switch.





SNK VS CAPCOM CHAOS

2003

■ After allowing Capcom to use its fighters in *Capcom Vs SNK*, SNK (now known as Playmore) returned the favour. The end result is a solid fighter that is largely based on *The King Of Fighters 2002*'s engine, although it drops the team-based combat of that game. Characters range from Earthquake and Terry Bogard to M Bison and Chun-Li, and feature a gritty style typical of most Neo-Geo brawlers.

MORE SNK GAMES

- ZARZON, 1981
- MARVIN'S MAZE, 1983
- ATHENA, 1986
- VICTORY ROAD, 1986
- BERMUDA TRIANGLE, 1987
- CHOPPER 1, 1988
- P.O.W. PRISONERS OF WAR, 1988
- BASEBALL STARS PROFESSIONAL, 1990
- MAGICIAN LORD, 1990
- SENGOKU, 1991
- ART OF FIGHTING, 1992
- TOP HUNTER: RODDY & CATHY, 1994
- THE KING OF FIGHTERS '98: THE SLUGFEST, 1998
- METAL SLUG X, 1999

Released: 1992
Format: Sega Mega Drive
Publisher: Sega Of America
Developer: Malibu Interactive
Key Staff: Chris Shrigley (programmer, design), Terry Lloyd (artist, design), Bernard Whang (producer and additional design), Bob Jacob (design, studio head), Jayne Shrigley (front end presentation, additional design)

BEHIND THE SCENES

EX-MUTANTS

Videogames and comics have had a mercurial relationship over the years; for every Batman: The Caped Crusader there's a Superman 64. games™ talks to two of the key developers behind this underrated Mega Drive game that saw the digitised debut of Malibu Comics stars the Ex-Mutants…



LOOKING BACK TODAY, MANY COMIC FANS VIEW THE EARLY-TO-MID NINETIES WITH CAUTIOUSLY NOSTALGIC EYES. The explosion of new titles in the medium, instigated to a certain degree by the formation of Image Comics in 1992, created a surge of interest in comic books across the world, reviving old franchises and generating new stars, often fashionably conflicted anti-heroes such as the devilish Spawn.

Malibu Comics, based in California, had been formed in 1986 by Dave Olbrich and Tom Mason, and begun with a combination of new characters and licensed properties such as Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes. Meanwhile, *Ex-Mutants* made its debut the same year under the Eternity Comics imprint, and was originally envisaged as a spoof of Marvel's countless 'X' titles, before becoming a more serious story itself. From 1988 onwards, Eternity produced *Ex-Mutants: The Shattered Earth Chronicles*, while in 1992 Malibu itself published further volumes as part of its Genesis line until the publisher's takeover by Marvel in 1994.

> **"I ACTUALLY OWNED A COMIC BOOK SHOP CALLED 'THE NEW FRONTIER' IN DERBY CITY CENTRE"**
> CHRIS SHRIGLEY

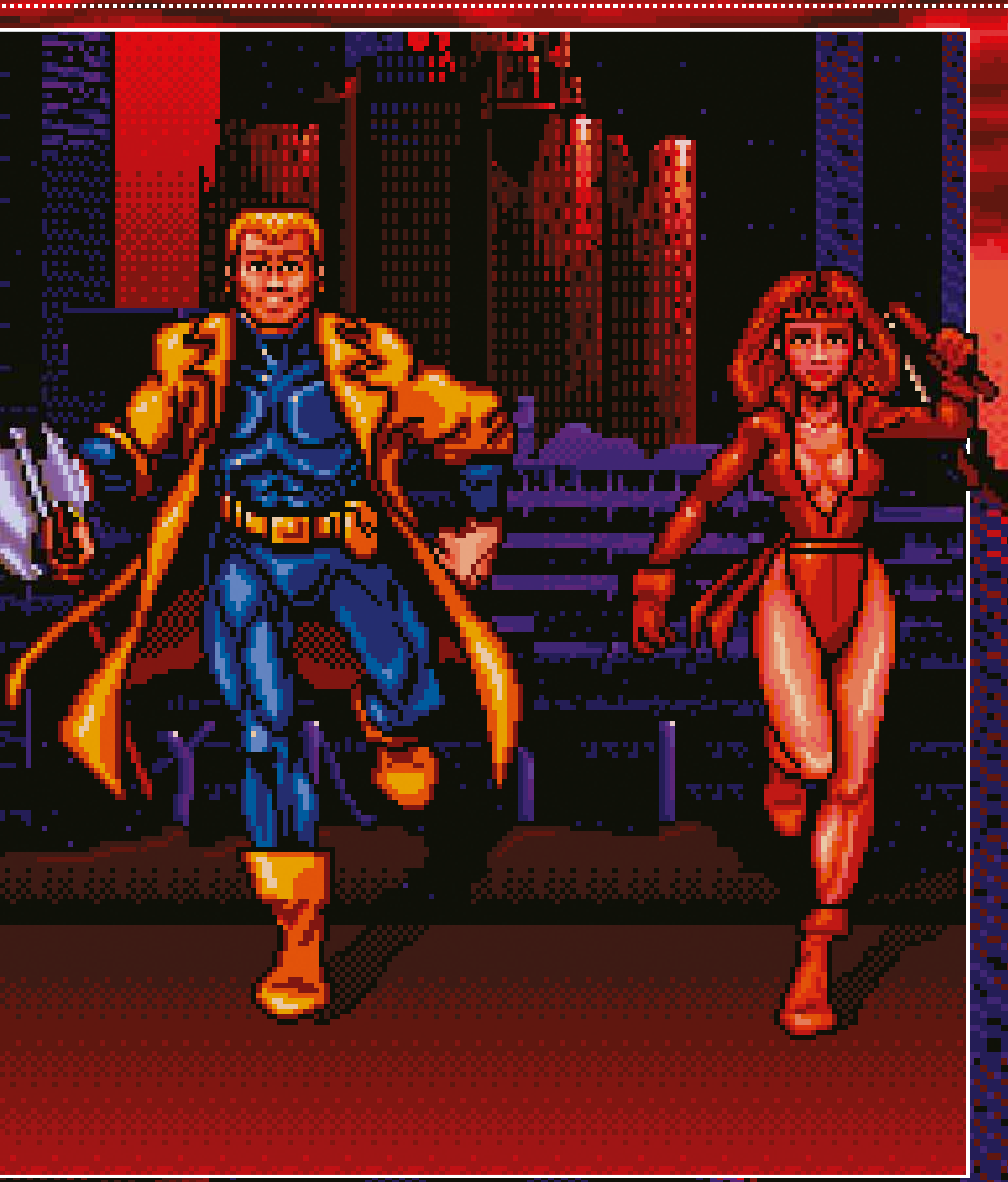
Created by David Lawrence and Ron Lim, both versions of the *Ex-Mutants* comic book take place in the near future, where a nuclear war has destroyed the planet and horribly mutated those unfortunate enough to survive. Six mutants (three male, three female) are selected by a robotic professor for a genetic experiment to transform them back into human form. Sent forth to the devastated remains of the surface, the six heroes must fight to inspire the remaining population and hopefully begin to recreate the human race back from the mutantkind they have become. In the early Nineties, buoyed by the rejuvenation of comics in general, Malibu expanded, merging with Acme Interactive to form Malibu Interactive, a software development company ready to create games based on Malibu Comics properties. Even before this happened, however, *Ex-Mutants* was in the works.

British coder Chris Shrigley had been working at the developer while it was still Acme. "I had been working on NES games for Eurocom in the UK," he begins, "And got headhunted by Acme. The gig was to work on the Sega Mega Drive, making an unknown game." Being an adventurer at heart, Shrigley jumped at the opportunity, selling everything in the UK and moving his family to the US in 1991. A year later, Acme became Malibu Interactive (thanks to the efforts of Acme's owner and comic book nut, Bob Jacob) and Shrigley continued to work on what transpired to be *Ex-Mutants*. "I actually owned a comic book shop called 'The New Frontier' in Derby city centre," he reveals. "So I knew a fair bit about comics and was an avid collector." For a young man fresh from Derby, the Acme offices were something of an eye-opener. "They had a lot of comic art on the walls, including original Jack Kirby stuff. We got to tour the Malibu studio and warehouse when they were in Westlake/Agoura Hills, and had free pickings of all the comics we could carry. I was in paradise."

Yet despite his enthusiasm for comics, Shrigley was unaware of *Ex-Mutants* before an issue was dropped on his desk, and he was instructed to create a game based around it. It was also to be his first effort on the Sega console. "When I got the job, Bob [Jacob, studio head] gave me a photocopy of the dev manuals from Sega, all in Japanese," he says. "It was hard to assimilate without the hardware, but pretty easy once I got my hands on it. It was very nice too; nice hardware design with plenty



Ex-Mutants' intro recaps how Dr Kildare created the Ex-Mutants. Well, not actually *how* he did it, but you get the idea.



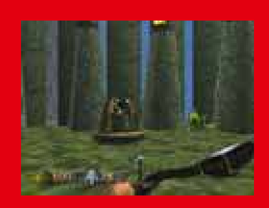
FROM THE PANEL TO THE SCREEN

FIVE MORE COMICS TURNED INTO VIDEOGAMES

BATMAN: THE CAPED CRUSADER (OCEAN SOFTWARE, 1988)

This 8-bit/16-bit game from Ocean's close development partners, Special FX, paid homage brilliantly to the comic by displaying each room in its own comic book-style panel. In tune with Batman's detective origins, there are plenty of puzzles to solve, as well as enemies to despatch.





TUROK (ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT, 1997)

When Valiant rebooted *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* in 1992, it set in motion the events that would see the ancient hero appear on the Nintendo 64 five years later. Pushing the console to the limits, it has gameplay drawbacks that make it a frustrating experience today, although it is more action-focused than the comic book itself, and a huge hit back in 1997.

DINOSAURS FOR HIRE (SEGA OF AMERICA, 1993)

This Eternity title moved across to Malibu with *Ex-Mutants* when it took over the publisher, and also ended up as a Sega Mega Drive game. Playing one of three dinos with their own strengths and weaknesses, it's an entertaining run 'n' gun game from Sega Of America and Malibu.





SHADOW MAN (ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT, 1999)

Having purchased Valiant Comics, it wasn't long before further related videogames appeared following on from the success of *Turok*. This dark tale of a voodoo warrior with supernatural powers found an audience on multiple platforms and spawned a sequel, *2econd Coming*, on the PlayStation 2 in 2002.

SPAWN: THE VIDEOGAME (ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT, 1995)

This brawler, while featuring some lovely sprites that are faithful to the original devilish comic strip, unfortunately lacks a little in variety and general gameplay. Nevertheless, it's still an enjoyable fighting game for any fan of Todd McFarlane's extremely popular comic book.





Los Angeles, 2055. An abandoned and desolate city.

of cool things to play with." Lead designer and artist on *Ex-Mutants*, Terry Lloyd, had also moved across to the States in the summer of 1991. Having been working at Core Design, Lloyd spotted an advert in *Popular Computing Weekly*. Like Shrigley, he was intrigued enough to relocate. "We didn't know what to expect – it was very exciting," he recalls. "We were put up in a hotel while we looked for an apartment, and my first task was to clean up and rotoscope some American football sprites on the PC." After contributing graphics for several other sports games, Lloyd recalls the beginning of *Ex-Mutants*. "The boss, Bob Jacob, was friends with Scott Rosenberg of Malibu, and they had been talking about turning some of the comics into videogames. Bob came to Chris and me one day and said he wanted to make a game based on *Ex-Mutants*. We thought it had potential to make a good side-scrolling action/platform game, so began discussing ideas straight away." Much like Shrigley, it was also Lloyd's first experience of the Sega 16-bit console. He explains to us, "Up until then I had been used to fairly limited graphics on computers like the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Atari ST, with the most luxurious of the time being the Amiga. So when given the potential for multiple playfields, loads of sprites, multiple 16-colour sprites and higher resolution, it was an artist's dream. I was keen to see what it could do and try and take advantage of it to make a cool game."

With Lloyd assuming the role of main designer, contributions came in from Shrigley, Jacob and producer Bernie Whang. "We had a couple of brainstorming sessions with a few of the Malibu comic staff," continues Lloyd. "They'd contribute ideas, and approve any of ours that took creative license with the characters and universe they'd established." With the background story not quite as prevalent in the early Nineties as it is today, the team focused on recreating locations and situations that they felt firstly would make good gameplay, then look interesting, before finally wrapping a story around them.

Contrastingly, *Ex-Mutants*' two main developers felt differently about the source material. Despite being a self-confessed comic nut, Shrigley thought the Malibu book "seemed a little derivative and cliché", and Lloyd, while more interested in solo characters such as Spider-Man and Silver Surfer, appreciated *Ex-Mutants*' tongue-in-cheek humour and varied characters. 'I read all the available comics as part of research, and the design was influenced quite a lot by characters and situations,' the latter reveals. "Key characters, their origins, roles, abilities and some of the post-apocalyptic settings were taken from reading the Malibu reboot." That evocative setting, in keeping with the comic book, contains the robotic Professor Kildare, and his nemesis, Sluggo, a corpulent mutant clearly based on *Star Wars*' Jabba The Hutt. "Originally we also wanted to have all six main characters as playable in the game," reveals Lloyd, "But time constraints meant that we just had Ackroyd and Shannon as playable, with the remaining four members popping up in story and dialogue." Here, producer Whang helped flesh out the various characters, tidied up some of the writing and added written dialogue.

With the approval process from Malibu running smoothly, the basic design for *Ex-Mutants* became fluid, constricted only by the limitations of the Mega Drive, as Lloyd continues. "Yes, we ran into technical limitations with memory and storage, so we had to make some compromises and changes as we went. It was easy

though, because our approval process was all internal, so stuff could change quickly; we'd make changes based on schedule and technical discoveries." While development ran efficiently, Acme's publishing deal unfortunately didn't. Having secured Sage's Creation (publisher of other Mega Drive games such as *Insector X* and *Crack Down*) to release the game, its financial difficulties meant a frantic re-negotiation of publication rights, and the move to Sega Of America most likely put paid to a proposed SNES version of Ex-Mutants. "I recall a SNES version was in the early stages of development," recalls Lloyd. "Some basic display work was done and I think I may have started to colour up the graphics with the more palettes available; but it never transpired, and maybe the change of publisher was a factor in that."

The game begins in the year is 2055, and Earth has been devastated by the genetic and biological weapons of World War III. Mankind itself has been mutated by the radiation, in combination with deadly viruses, creating a race of physically repulsive creatures. Professor Kildare, a crimson-eyed robot, has made it its mission to help mankind regain its genetic origins. Searching up and down the country, Kildare has located six mutants whom it believed could survive its purifying transformation process. These three men (Ackroyd, Dillon, Bud) and women (Shannon, Tanya and Piper) are the new heroes of the overground. Sworn enemies of the disgusting mutant, Sluggo, four of the Ex-Mutants have been kidnapped by Zygote, a pandering minion of the evil mutant. The remaining two, Ackroyd and Shannon, must venture forth into the villain's world to try and free their comrades. Ahead of them lay devious traps, mazes and Sluggo's various henchmutants. Danger lurks everywhere; this will not be easy.

"Progression and balance issues spiked in certain areas," recalls Lloyd, "but I remember that Bernie would play the game, and he'd say that some areas were too easy that I thought were too hard, and vice versa. So I suppose it's subjective." As was common for the time, there was no testing department at Acme; the designers and coders themselves tested their games. "[Testing] wasn't for playability or elegance of design," recalls Shrigley. "It was for bugs and gameplay problems. Today, you can put out a patch, but you couldn't do that with cartridges." Compromises for the technology were everywhere thanks to the elaborate design, most notably in a mine-cart sequence that concludes level two. Shrigley grimaces as he recalls the high-speed section. "We had to make our own pretend physics that looked like proper physics and wouldn't drop the game below 60 FPS. Our credo back then was, 'If it looks right, it is right!'." While the segment plays admirably swiftly, it's perhaps the most compromised of all levels in order to achieve the effect. "I saw a video of it recently," continues Shrigley, "and it made me cringe. We even made the cart have a single wheel because we couldn't afford the extra frames for having it tilt and ride the rails smoothly. Everything was smoke and mirrors."

The coder is more pleased with the underground subway section later in the game. Here, Ackroyd or Shannon must travel along the fast-moving train, battling

WHAT THEY SAID...

The game itself is a lot more fun than the look suggests. It's basically an amalgam of umpteen platform games. Ultimately, it's not the best at anything, but far from the worst of all

Mean Machines, 1992



■ *Ex-Mutants* coder Chris Shrigley.



"WE HAD TO MAKE OUR OWN PRETEND PHYSICS THAT LOOKED LIKE PROPER PHYSICS AND WOULDN'T DROP THE GAME BELOW 60 FPS"
CHRIS SHRIGLEY

■ The Jabba the Hutt-esque Sluggo is the final boss, and a mean one at that.



■ Dr Kildare explains his mission during the intro screens.

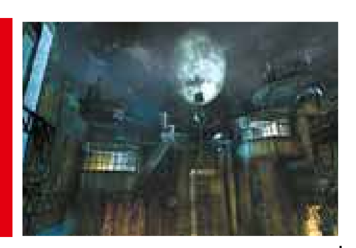
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Rick Dangerous > Ex-Mutants > Batman: Arkham Asylum



The comic-book style of *Rick Dangerous* coupled with platform action clearly part-inspired *Ex-Mutants*



Another grim backdrop for what many consider the new benchmark in comic book adaptations, *Arkham Asylum*.





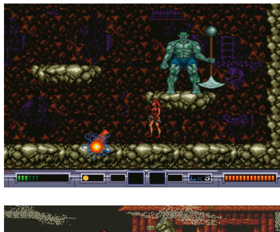
WHAT THEY SAID…

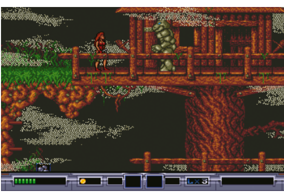
Ex-Mutants is a classic arcade platform slash-'em-up. If you like a bit of a challenge and platformers are your thang, then this game is definitely worth buying

MEGA, 1993



This underground train level is a particular highlight.





mutants and dodging lethal obstructions. "That was pretty complicated, with all the layers and different speed scrolls. The trick was simply using two playfields effectively, dividing them up and scrolling bits of them at different speed to give the impression of depth and parallax. Attach the odd sprite to a particular scrolling piece, so you get a little overlap on the one above/behind, and you get a good sense of depth and movement." Despite the drawbacks, the 'speed' levels (which also included a river rapids section) break up the flow of the game well, giving the player some much-needed variation from the its core genre of platform gameplay. "I was a big gamer at the time," notes Lloyd, "and was sometimes influenced by other games I was playing. The subway train section, for example, was inspired by *Final Fight*, and was designed to give a feeling of the high-speed of a runaway train, combined with gameplay progressing on top and inside the train." Here, the game shifts to a more linear beat-'em-up style, with bonus items to pick up while combating individual enemies.

Towards the end of a relatively calm development, things began to get testy, as Shrigley remembers painfully. "Everything was close to the wire, all the time, every day, and *Ex-Mutants* had a brutal crunch at the end. I lived at the office for a few weeks, sleeping on the sofa and going home for showers." The effect on the coder's young family, recently relocated from the UK can only be imagined. Fortunately, having worked with Lloyd before, at least the pair had a good understanding. "That's not to say we didn't have any problems; there were many, and pretty constant, whether political or technical. But we'd just work through stuff, and it usually worked out."

In the end, despite the technical limitations, design flaws and crunch, *Ex-Mutants* was released in 1992 to generally positive reviews. "All things considered, I was pleased with the final game." says Lloyd. "Chris and I were the only full-time members on a tight schedule, both working on a machine we'd never developed on before. So I'm satisfied we did a good job, and it's quite a decent game, looking back. There were some difficulty and balancing issues, which maybe could have been addressed given more time, but it's smooth, playable and looks fairly decent." After a deceptive ease-you-in level outside Professor Kildare's laboratory, *Ex-Mutants* does indeed present a stern challenge to even the most experienced gamer. "We were all pretty hardcore coin-op gamers, and held the belief that games should be brutally difficult," notes Shrigley. "So we made the game as difficult as we could bear ourselves."

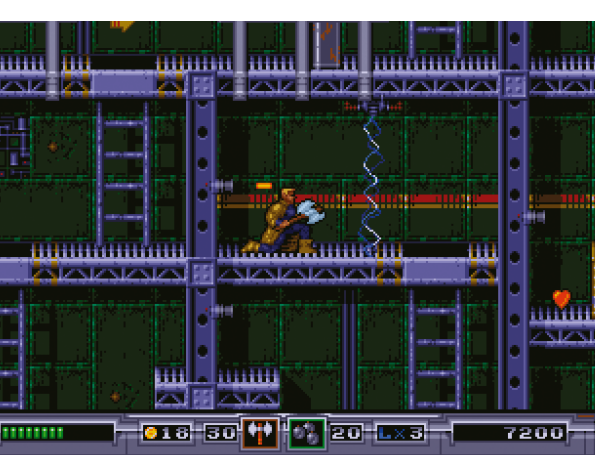
Given the team's own gaming skills, coupled with the constant playtesting of *Ex-Mutants*, it seems inevitable it was always going to be tough for most players. Nevertheless, the game served another vital purpose, as Malibu Comics, won over by Bob Jacob's enthusiasm, merged with Acme to form the Malibu Interactive division of the comic book producer during its development. When the Ultraverse imprint (a shared universe of superheroes that used a range of crossovers) was unveiled in 1993, it seemed the future was bright for Malibu Interactive. Remembers Shrigley, "We started work on a Street Fighter brawler based on the Ultraverse characters. I still have some documents and source code stashed some place from that." A tumultuous time was imminent as the company was completely subsumed into Malibu, before the comic publisher itself was purchased by Marvel in 1994, signalling the end of the studio. "We made a small prototype of that game, but nothing came of it. The company was going through a seismic shift, but I'd already left and started working at Disney."

Lloyd, who remained at Malibu Interactive, found himself working on an entirely different type of license from *Ex-Mutants*, Thomas The Tank Engine, before involvement on Ultraverse titles back in the UK for Malibu Interactive's new Warrington division. "*Prime*, *Firearm* and *The Strangers* were the key titles

Dr Kildare helpfully points the way.






The hero's first task is to break out of the abandoned laboratory.

in development, but there may have been a couple more," he notes. A SNES game, this time based on the morphing liquid-flesh hero, Prime, was briefly worked on by Lloyd before finally seeing light of day on the double-pack with fellow Sega-CD game Microcosm. "Malibu was also in talks with Image Comics about making games based on their characters. I remember working on a design and some character sprites for a Spawn game, but it was very speculative." The takeover by Marvel, coupled with a sharp downturn of the comic book market, spelled the end of the Ultraverse and any further videogame adaptations.

Despite attempted reboots, Mega Drive *Ex-Mutants* remains one of the last gasps of this underrated comic book. "I think the design captured the overall story of the *Ex-Mutants* pretty well," concludes Shrigley, "and all the relevant characters and plot points were covered quite succinctly. The Mega Drive was probably my all-time favourite console to develop on as well. So you can see I was one lucky programmer, programming in a language I loved, on a console I adored, in a place that blew my tiny, small-town English mind."

Despite the decent reviews, sales were less than stellar. "The license was just too unknown, so it had to survive on its own merits," shrugs Lloyd. "Sega took it on at the last minute, so there was hardly any marketing hype for it all." Although the game was developed as Acme, Malibu carried adverts for it within their range of comics. But again, the relative niche of these meant there was little momentum building up prior to release. "It is what it is," says Lloyd, with little regret. "[*Ex-Mutants*] was developed with enthusiasm and professionalism, with the knowledge, experience and resources available at the time. If the comic and license had taken off, and competed with Marvel's X-Men, as it was originally trying to do, I think I would design it as a Metroidvania mapping quest game, open up the professor's lab as a base/hub, and expand the above ground post-apocalyptic wastelands and skyscrapers."

But it was not to be, and *Ex-Mutants* remains a footnote in the history of both comic books and Mega Drive games. Another comic game, developed at Malibu Interactive, demonstrated what could have been. "Another team at the time, with Andy Green as programmer, was developing a game based on *Batman Returns*," closes Lloyd. "It ended up selling about 20 times as many copies as *Ex-Mutants*. Chris and I were probably green with envy when Andy received his first royalty cheque."

EX-MUTANTS FACT FILE

More facts from a devastated Los Angeles

1 Chris Shrigley's wife, Jayne, helped with storyboarding, design, front end and story art. Of particular note was her evocative drawing of a destroyed LA city skyline.

2 Starting development in October 1991, *Ex-Mutants* took approximately eight to ten months to create.

3 The game was originally envisaged as having a one-hit-dead system until Terry Lloyd, after playing games such as *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts* and *ESWAT*, decided to add an energy bar.

4 A SNES version was planned, but abandoned shortly after development began.

5 The original design called for all six characters to be playable. It became apparent at an early stage that this was not going to be possible, resulting in just two playable main characters.

6 Ackroyd's 'You're going down' taunt was recorded in the acoustics-friendly bathroom at the Acme offices. The voice is Acme producer James Maxwell.

7 Formed from the ashes of Cinemaware, Acme hired more British talent aside from Lloyd and Shrigley, and after Malibu Interactive closed, many of them formed successful studios such as Neversoft, Left Field Productions and Clockwork Tortoise.

8 Chris Shrigley is still developing today. His latest game, *Immortal Darkness: Curse Of The Pale King* is due for release around Halloween and can be checked out at www.immortaldarkness.com.






At the end of each level awaits a difficult henchman of Sluggo's.



INTERVIEW

GETTING DIZZY WITH THE OLIVER TWINS

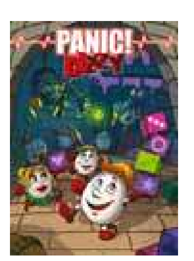
The Oliver Twins tell **games**™ about the latest Dizzy discovery and reveal why they're excited to be bringing the character back in a new adventure



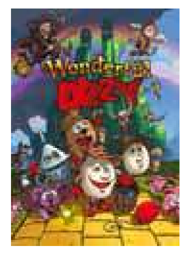
SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Dizzy [1987]
Designers, programmers, artists



Panic Dizzy [1992]
Designers, programmers



Wonderful Dizzy [2018 (TBC)]
Designers

We see you've found another unreleased Dizzy game. Can you tell us more about this?
Philip Oliver: Sure. It's a game called *Panic! Dizzy,* which we wrote in 1992 when we were looking for game ideas for the NES. It was based on a game called *Dizzy Panic,* which we'd released in 1990 for the Spectrum, Amstrad, C64, ST and Amiga but since we hadn't been entirely happy with that game, we felt the best way forward was to design it from scratch and resolve the problems. Unfortunately the game wasn't released at the time so it was backed up, put in the loft and forgotten about. When the retro revival emerged in recent years, however, we decided to see what we had. *Panic! Dizzy* was our latest find.

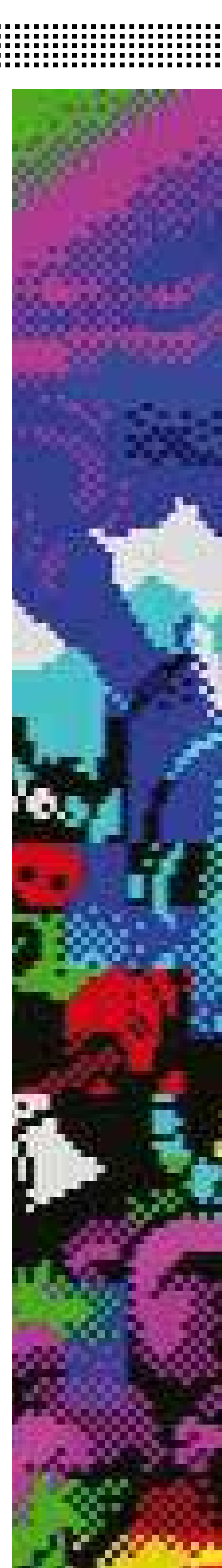
SADLY WE JUST CAN'T REMEMBER HOW TO WRITE 6502 ASSEMBLY CODE ANY MORE

Given you've also rediscovered *Wonderland Dizzy, Mystery World Dizzy* and *Dreamworld Pogie* in the past, you've been sitting on some fantastic treasures, haven't you?
Andrew Oliver: Since we'd spent so much time on these games, we didn't want to lose them and, because we're pretty organised, we made sure that we backed stuff up. Unlike many developers, we also archived all our work by putting all our designs, discs and other materials in our lofts, but working through all these boxes of old discs has taken a lot of time and work. We sorted out an enormous amount a few years ago whilst collecting everything for our Kickstarter book, *Let's Go Dizzy. The Story of the Oliver Twins* and this forced us to go through all the boxes and try and work out what exactly we had. That's when we began to find things.

But why wasn't *Panic! Dizzy* released in 1992?
PO: At the time we'd set up our game development studios off the back of our very successful 8-bit computer games that included the Dizzy series and a lot of the Simulators. We rented offices and employed some game developers to create new games, primarily on the NES, which was very popular in the US but, unfortunately, Codemasters entered a legal battle with Nintendo over the Game Genie.

Codemasters assured us that everything would be fine and it said it hadn't done anything wrong so we should carry on writing the games they'd agreed to. But although Codemasters eventually won the court case and were awarded a huge payout, the delay caused the Darlings, who owned Codemasters, to re-evaluate the games they'd publish. Disappointingly for us, they chose not to release many of the games that our new studio had written and we were not compensated for lost earnings. This left us virtually bankrupt since we'd invested everything we'd earned, from all our success, in producing these games exclusively for them. We spoke to an agent, Jacqui Lyons, who represented other game authors in the industry and she helped us secure contracts with other publishers and even advanced us money to prevent us actually going bankrupt. But it did mean many games didn't see the light of day.

Are you finding the old game media has remained intact, though?
AO: Well, finding the good stuff is very difficult because we are discovering old floppy discs,





PLAYING DIZZY

Keen to play *Panic! Dizzy*? Then you'll need to keep an eye out for its release. The best places to discover the latest Dizzy news are **Yolkfolk.com**, a website run by superfan Andrew Joseph, and @TheOliverTwins on Twitter. You can also play some of the previously discovered and released games online at **wonderlanddizzy.com**, **mysteryworlddizzy.com** and **dreamworldpogie.com** or check out a reveal trailer for *Wonderful Dizzy* at **wonderfuldizzy.com**.

Amstrad discs, tape drives, old writable CD and so on, that are not entirely readable, either because we don't have the hardware or the media is slightly corrupted. Then we have back ups that aren't quite the full working versions – it means the source code and assets require a development environment to recompile before any minor changes can be made so that has to be in place too.

Have you needed to carry out much work on *Panic! Dizzy*?

PO: Yes. The discs we found appeared to be 'end of project' discs but because they contained source code, they needed compiling with the old Programmer Development System, an old DOS compiler and some special PC hardware. Thankfully, the advent of emulators helped at this point, which meant once a compiled ROM had been rebuilt, it could be checked relatively easily. We needed to find someone who would locate and fix the bugs, though, because sadly we just can't remember how to write 6502 assembly code any more and we just wouldn't be able to find the time to re-learn. Luckily, as with the other unreleased NES games we found, we could call upon Lukasz Kur, to whom we are very grateful, to recompile them and clean up a few minor issues.

So how is *Panic! Dizzy* on the NES different to *Dizzy Panic*?

AO: The original *Dizzy Panic* came about after playing *Tetris* on the Game Boy. We were so amazed by its addictive nature and simplicity that it led us to wanting to create our own puzzle game.

From that point, it was an interesting exercise in analysing what makes a puzzle game so addictive but the artists and I were very busy finishing up *Fantastic Dizzy* on the NES at this time so Philip designed a game and worked with a local developer, Big Red Software, to implement it on the home computers. We'd worked with Big Red before. These guys had been writing the *Dizzy* games on the 8-bit computers when we were turning our focus to the NES. So they took our idea of basing the game in a factory where Dizzy was working a production line with conveyor belts and got to work. The player had to control Dizzy, helping him sort objects as fast as he could with everything getting faster until Dizzy and the player couldn't keep up. The problem was the design, which we felt was flawed. Big Red hadn't done a great job of implementation but there were no risk and reward strategies.

So we picked on the format of falling blocks and removed the conveyor belt. We then thought about possible variations based around this format. We expected one to be a clear winner, but we found each had their merits and so we decided we could offer better value for money by polishing all of them and leaving them all accessible in the one game.

Some of your previous finds have been made available on cartridge for the NES. Is this going to be the case for *Panic! Dizzy*?

PO: Now that we have the game fully working, we would certainly like to release it as a real Nintendo cartridge.

There are lots of fans out there of both the NES and *Dizzy* and Kickstarter is the perfect platform for making this a reality because we're able to promote the prospect of owning a real cartridge and then manufacture the number of units that get ordered. It's only going to get one production run and it will be financed with the backers' funds. Our profit on these cartridges will be going to the charity, Special Effect, which enables disabled children to have access to video games. We're restoring these games as a hobby.

So are we to expect any more games from the past?

AO: It's certainly possible, but that's for another time.

We can only hope. So, which of those previously unreleased games have excited you the most?



WE FEEL CONFIDENT IT WILL BE THE BEST DIZZY GAME EVER MADE ON THE SPECTRUM

PO: To be honest, we're really pleased that all of them have finally seen the light of day. We make games for people to play and enjoy, not for storing in a loft, and each game has its own charm. What's incredible and still hard for us to comprehend though, is how we were able to squeeze such large games into just 128k of memory. In the case of *Panic! Dizzy* – it's only 64k, which is less than half a second of uncompressed MP3 music or a JPEG photo of just 128 x 128 pixels, which is the size of a Windows Desktop icon.

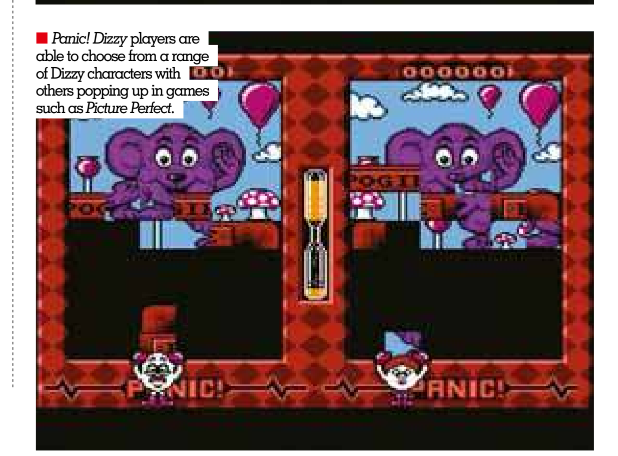
You're also set to release *Wonderful Dizzy*, which is a new adventure that you've been developing from scratch for the new Spectrum Next computer, which is enhancement of the original ZX Spectrum range from back in the day. How is work progressing?

AO: Very well although a bit slower than we would have all liked. With everyone working on it as a hobby, it's not getting anyone's full attention and it's worth bearing in mind that the original *Dizzy* games were written when we literally spent nearly all our waking hours working on them. But that said, within the first few months Piotr 'PIT' Gratkiewicz



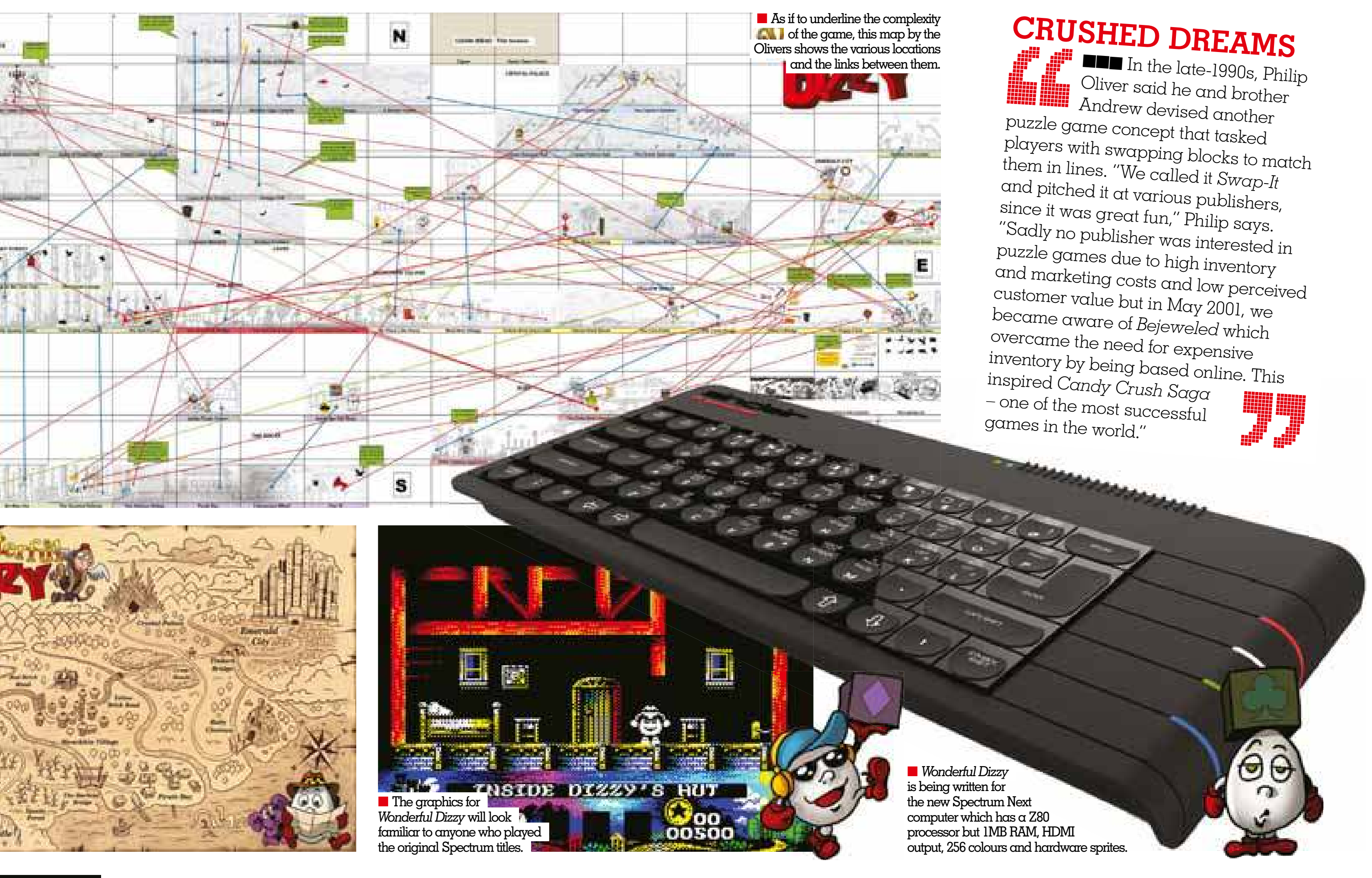
■ All of the games in *Panic! Dizzy* can be played by one or two people including the frantic Four Suits option.





■ *Panic! Dizzy* players are able to choose from a range of Dizzy characters with others popping up in games such as *Picture Perfect*.





As if to underline the complexity of the game, this map by the Olivers shows the various locations and the links between them.

The graphics for *Wonderful Dizzy* will look familiar to anyone who played the original Spectrum titles.

Wonderful Dizzy is being written for the new Spectrum Next computer which has a Z80 processor but 1MB RAM, HDMI output, 256 colours and hardware sprites.

CRUSHED DREAMS

In the late-1990s, Philip Oliver said he and brother Andrew devised another puzzle game concept that tasked players with swapping blocks to match them in lines. "We called it *Swap-It* and pitched it at various publishers, since it was great fun," Philip says. "Sadly no publisher was interested in puzzle games due to high inventory and marketing costs and low perceived customer value but in May 2001, we became aware of *Bejeweled* which overcame the need for expensive inventory by being based online. This inspired *Candy Crush Saga* – one of the most successful games in the world."

had created some wonderful new art for the characters and box art and we had worked out the main story elements, the areas, puzzles and general flow.

We then had to put in some serious work into designing the whole map, which were all hand-drawn screens, just like the old days. Unlike the old days, though, these were all scanned, put into Excel and the puzzles attached, so that it could be played out 'virtually'. Alongside this, Philip worked out a large, but very funny, narrative script for all the characters.

Is it a big game?

PO: Well the full walkthrough description of the game is 18 pages long and we have around 68 screens in the game, which Dmitri and Jarrod have mostly created now. Evgeniy, the main coder, has been implementing these as well as the puzzles and they've been incorporating some of the new features that are being added to the game.

Have you been getting your hands dirty with code too?

AO: I'm afraid that along with 6502, which was used on the Commodore 64 and NES, and 68000 used on the Mega Drive, our Z80 coding is too rusty to be helpful so we'd struggle to write games for the Spectrum or Amstrad come to that, today. It takes a huge amount of time to write these games and there's no way we could have found the time to focus, get back into the mindset and produce all the code as well.

Are you closely following the formula of past Dizzy games?

PO: Even though it's over 25 years since the last *Dizzy* game we made, we want it to be made to the same formula and the same restrictions as those originals. We want to make it the natural sequel with a whole new story, new characters, locations and new features, and generally improve the whole look and feel. That is what we are aiming to do, and we feel confident this is the correct approach and what the fans of the original would be looking for. It's going very well, and we feel confident it will be the best *Dizzy* game ever made on the Spectrum.

Have you been impressed by the Spectrum Next?

AO: The guys behind the Spectrum Next are doing a great job. I think it's taking a little longer than they anticipated but they really care about getting it right and we can sympathise with that. Their ambitions have also taken over a bit as many fans wanted "true spectrum emulation" whilst others wanted extra features like hardware scrolling and hardware sprites, so in trying to please everyone they have created an impressive computer with multiple modes. For our part, we decided we'd design a new *Dizzy* game, but keep to the parameters of the original Spectrum.

GTM: So you're not taking advantage of the Spectrum Next's enhanced graphics and sound modes?

PO: Currently we're designing and coding the game to work on original hardware, which will look great on the Spectrum Next. It's under discussion what enhancements will be made for a Spectrum Next enhanced version but we're sure it will have some new features. The important thing is to get the main game developed first.

GTM: Will you be releasing the game on other formats?

AO: We feel the game is very strong and it would be a shame not to get it released on other formats in the future. But let's see the reaction of players, before we invest heavily on bringing this to modern platforms, which would be a lot of additional work.





Ubisoft has claimed that it was playing *Beyond Good & Evil* that convinced Peter Jackson to work with it and Ancel in particular on the *King Kong* game.

GAME CHANGERS

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

Developer: Ubisoft **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Released:** 11 Nov 2003 **System:** PS2, PC, Xbox, GameCube

Critically acclaimed, commercially unsuccessful, and yet still an important touchstone for the evolution of action games. We take a look at why

NOT ALL GAME-CHANGERS are major successes. Alas, sometimes even time doesn't necessarily prove their final quality, but somehow, against the odds and their own nature they help to shape the future of games, and become a must-play experience for the impact they ultimately had on all that follows. *Beyond Good & Evil* is one such game.

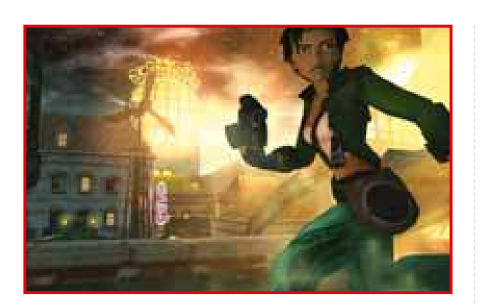
Michel Ancel's ambitious adventure had its issues and it would be fair to say that time has not been kind in some respects, but the ripples its release sent out through the industry cannot be denied. Ancel and Ubisoft Montpellier's singular vision, its art direction, its commitment to a particular tone and to the clear definition of its characters have left a lasting impression on the games that have dared to follow in its footsteps. It may not have managed to complete the journey it set out on, but it certainly lit the path for others to follow.

WITH SO MUCH OF THE WORLD AND STYLE OF BEYOND GOOD & EVIL BEING SO OUTLANDISH, IT IS JADE WHO GROUNDS THE EXPERIENCE

So, let's be more specific about this path. Coming off the success of *Rayman*, Ancel put together a team of about 30 people with a wide range of creative backgrounds. There was game-development experience, of course, but also team members with backgrounds in animation and comics. There was a clear focus on world building and narrative coherence – things that had been explored, certainly, but perhaps not in something quite so outlandish and not combined with such a simple,

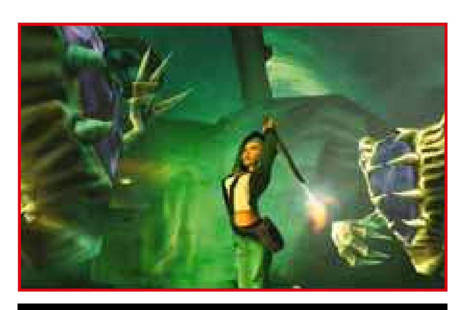
KEY FEATURES

THE CORE MECHANICS THAT HELPED BEYOND GOOD & EVIL STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD AND LIVE LONG IN THE MEMORY



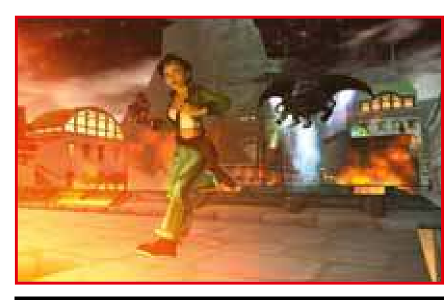
CAMERA WORK

★ Capturing the wildlife and varied species of Hillys is a major part of the game experience. It's thanks to the camera that you are able to expose the actions of the Alpha Sections with the help of the IRIS network and bring down the DomZ conspiracy.



FLUID COMBAT

★ It doesn't seem like much now, but Jade's ability to take on multiple enemies at one time in fluid melee combat without the need to lock on to them, and the ability to break off from one to another mid-flow with a little flip or spin, was pretty impressive.



ACTION SEQUENCES

★ We often cite the rooftop chase as one of the greatest moments in gaming history, delivering the kind of exciting action set piece that would go on to be perfected, more or less, by Naughty Dog in *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*.



clear focus: to give us as players a pure feeling of freedom and exploration.

Now, those concepts are rather abstract and perhaps freedom seems like an odd thing to cite when *Beyond Good & Evil* is a relatively linear experience, but this isn't freedom in the sandbox sense. What Ancel wanted to impart was a sense of a free-form world where you were making movements and choices within set parameters that felt organic and naturalistic, despite all of the outlandish things happening around you, and that was funnelled through the game's heroine, Jade. Your experience playing as Jade is so multifaceted and diverse that it can't help but feel freeing compared to the more restrictive ability sets and activities of most action games prior to *Beyond Good & Evil*. While the 3D Zelda games certainly achieved some of this, Jade did it in a very different style to Link.

With so much of the world and style of *Beyond Good & Evil* being so outlandish, it is Jade who grounds the experience with her approach and toolset. She's a highly capable individual, but there's not much about her that seems implausible in reality. Her fighting style is based in something recognisable as martial arts. She doesn't use a gun, but a stick, which implies she's not combat trained in the traditional sense, but perhaps has some self-defence knowledge instead. She moves fluidly and with great agility, but not superhuman levels of either.

In fact, there are many similarities in how we would describe Jade to what we would also say about someone like Nathan Drake (apart from the firearms use). Both are capable, but not impervious. Both are professional, but often in way over their head. And both offer deep and abiding connections to not only themselves, but the characters around them. Perhaps one area in which Jade greatly differs from Drake, however, is in the fact that she can't bring down the huge conspiracy she helps to uncover single-handedly. The best she can hope to achieve is to contribute to its downfall through her dedication and bravery.

Which really brings us to *Beyond Good & Evil*'s defining game mechanic and the one that has had a pretty significant and lasting impression on the industry: Jade's camera. As a professional photojournalist Jade takes it everywhere, and it is simultaneously her best source of consistent income (which you'll need for upgrades through the game) and the weapon she needs to utilise to bring down the DomZ. Ubisoft Montpellier was beaten to market by *Metroid Prime* with its scanning technology, but Jade's camera feels far more relatable thanks to its practicality. Through the lens of this device you see the world as she does while simultaneously having it revealed to you. It might not be as densely populated and emergent as worlds that would follow, but it is diverse and strange enough to offer surprises along the way.

Many of the topics and ideas that *Beyond Good & Evil* tackled were not necessarily new to gaming. Political corruption, conspiracy, alien invasion, secret societies and revolution have all had their role to play in action adventures and future dystopian fiction, but the combination of these ideas with such a unique lead character, with such a relatable world that was at once alien and familiar, was new. While graphically the game may have dated, its art direction, character design and setting remain incredibly strong. It felt more like a Studio Ghibli world than something we had seen from Ubisoft before, and that was special.

Beyond Good & Evil imperfectly attempted to do a lot of things, but like so many games that attempt to merge many genres and mechanics into one cohesive whole, the sum of the creation is greater than its parts, and in the attempt it helped to form a new benchmark for action games. It was a game about storytelling and immersion in a game world perhaps more than it was about puzzle solving or combat, and that shift in balance was significant for the games that would follow. Michel Ancel lit the way for those who would follow, and that's a big reason why *BG&E* is so beloved.

KEY FACTS

- Jade went through a few subtle redesigns to her look from the game's first reveal to release. The final and most significant made her look much more grown-up than her original design, so that she looked more like a seasoned professional.
- *Beyond Good & Evil* released in the same month as Ubisoft's other massive release of the year, *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, which proved to be far more commercially successful.
- It's been suggested that Michel Ancel's wife was the primary inspiration for the personality of Jade, helping to make her more approachable and believable.



GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT BEST USES OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS A GAME MECHANIC

THE TITLES THAT MANAGED TO TURN LOOKING DOWN A VIRTUAL LENS INTO SOMETHING REALLY FUN



POKÉMON SNAP

Taking the on-rails shooter and turning it into a safari-style exploration of Pokémon Island, aiming to capture as many quality pictures of Pokémon for Professor Oak as you can, has to be one of the more ingenious twists on genre convention we can think of. There's a reason why we keep clamouring for The Pokémon Company to take another crack at this concept, because it was just so much fun.



PROJECT ZERO

Another great concept and piece of execution as you use a camera to capture ghosts before they can injure you. All you have to do is keep them in the viewfinder for as long as possible. Of course given that this is a survival horror, staying in control of your feelings and remaining calm enough to achieve this is the real challenge. The lack of defence or separation from the apparitions really helps to beef up the tension.



BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

As a professional photojournalist, documenting the world around her is what Jade is all about, but the way in which it's integrated into the game not only as a motivation for her journey, but also a handy mechanic and side quest is excellent. Taking snaps of the wildlife around you earns you credits that can be spent on all-important upgrades the deeper into the game you go.



DEAD RISING

Another photojournalist who finds themselves in the heart of a massive conspiracy. Frank West has a little more fun with his pic-hunting in *Dead Rising* thanks to a rating system that instantly judges the quality of what he's captured. More intense shots earn better rewards to be spent on new tools down the line and some of them can be pretty strange. Since when are zombies ever erotic? Only in *Dead Rising*, we hope.



GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Rockstar's gigantic sandbox worlds are often dark reflections of our own, and that means they often reflect our own experiences with the technology you have at your disposal. What we love about Snapmatic, the in-game photo-sharing app, is that it took on its own meta use as a way of chronicling insane moments of destruction and mayhem with a cheeky selfie. Some of the snaps are really quite amazing.



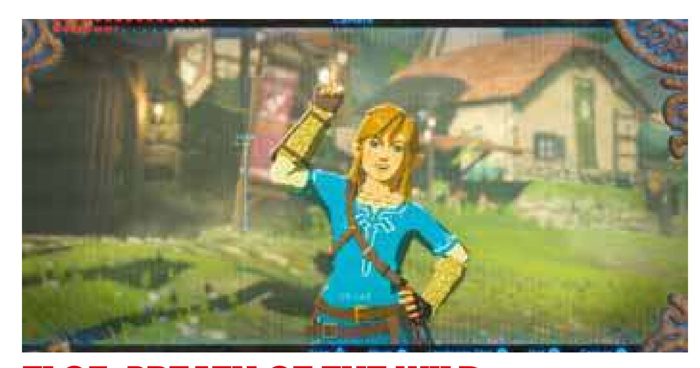
LIFE IS STRANGE

Photos act as one of *Life Is Strange*'s main collectibles through the experience as Max walks around with a Polaroid camera at the ready to snap anything that grabs her interest. These are triggered events, however, rather than free-form snaps, but it invites additional exploration and interest in the world around you, which is really the point. *Life Is Strange* uses this collectable as an excuse to pay more attention to the game world.



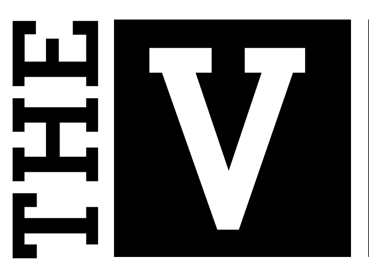
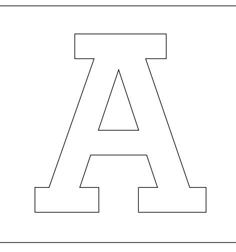
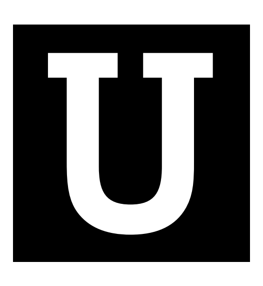
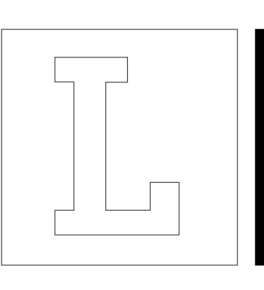
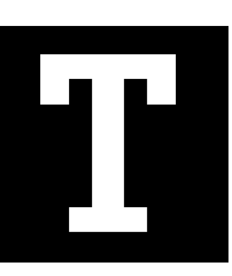
FINAL FANTASY XV

Photography takes two interesting forms in *FFXV*. The first is the ability to take shots when you like and save them, watching the way things play out around you and capturing whatever catches your eye. The other side of this is whenever you have Prompto in your squad he'll take photos as his leisure skill that you can look through later if you like. And they're often pretty good shots too.



TLOZ: BREATH OF THE WILD

The Picto Box in *Wind Waker* predates *Breath Of The Wild* as an example of photography in a Zelda game, but we prefer the more integrated and fully featured experience of using the Sheikah Slate in Link's latest adventure. Capturing examples of all of the weapons, creatures and enemies in the game became quite distracting, and taking selfies in front of attacking Guardian Stalkers never got old.

THE     

CLASSIC INTELLIMOUSE

MANUFACTURER: **MICROSOFT** PRICE: **£39.99**

For PC gamers who were perhaps wondering if the nostalgic controller love from Microsoft was only going to extend to bringing back the Duke for Xbox One, here is your answer. Based on the 2003 IntelliMouse 3.0, the Classic IntelliMouse approaches its tribute in a similar fashion, with near identical design and just a few modern upgrades.

There's something to be said for this stripped-back, basics-first approach to design that has become somewhat lost in the arms race for more back of the box features. Unlike so many gaming mice, there are no massive claims to esports expert testing or customisable lights flashing all around the device. The IntelliMouse is all about comfort and practicality, which is why it remains a much-loved design even 15 years after its initial release.

What this new version brings is the same ergonomic design (which is still one of the most comfortable out there, so long as you're right handed), button placement remains unchanged although there's a nice lightness to the main left and right buttons that feels very responsive, the 1,000 rps rate means that it's very responsive to your movements and features Microsoft's BlueTrack technology that should allow the mouse to perform well on any surface you can throw under it.

The only real flair touch is a little under lighting on the rear of the mouse where the old red translucent band used to sit, and it's perhaps thanks to this lack of overall flair that the price point is kept down too. It might not offer any customisation of feel like some pro-level mice (although you can customise the button inputs) or promise a massive change in your performance, but what it does offer is solid all-rounder experience and easy compatibility with anything you need it to plug into. This is just good, no-nonsense mouse design.

www.microsoft.com

VERDICT 8/10

The design of this mouse is very nearly 100 per cent identical to the original version, with the same comfortable fit and style to it.

All of the buttons can be custom-mapped to the inputs you desire, and there are plenty of them to pick from to really give you fast action to key abilities in games or hot keys for access to features on your desktop.

GAMING CLOTHING



FULTON

Inspired by the wonderfully bizarre but incredibly effective balloon shipping service from the Metal Gear series, we really love this tee. It might be the somewhat resigned look of the sheep that really sells it to us.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



NO MO RULES

Honouring Ryuji Sakamoto from *Persona 5*, this tee is a direct replica from the character, but also a wonderful celebration of the core energy and philosophy of the series. It's anarchic, fun-loving and very cool.

www.insertcoinclothing.com



CRASH BANDICOOT 'HIGH FOUR'

Lots of things to like about this design. The chunky outline of the character art is very cool, the greyscale colouring that features both orange highlights and overaps. It's packed with Crash's trademark energy.

www.playstation-gear.com

THEMED COLLECTION: OVERWATCH GEAR



FIGMA REAPER

PRICE: **£69.99**

This super-posable figure has some fantastic detailing on it, as well as a number of swappable items that allow you to recreate classic poses and actions from *Overwatch*. As ever, Reaper is one of the coolest and most physically expressive (even if not facially) characters in the game, and this Figma figure captures that really well.

gear.blizzard.com

TRACER BOMBER JACKET

PRICE: **£89.99**

Quite apart from if you're looking for a jacket to tie together your Tracer cosplay, this is just a really cool jacket. It's obviously based on her default look from the game, albeit in a more casual, everyday style. The air force nods and union flag really tie it together rather nicely.

gear.blizzard.com

NENDOROID D.VA

PRICE: **£44.99**

Everyone knows that Nendoroids are officially the cutest figures in all of toy-making. This has been proven in lab conditions, but they don't get much cuter in *Overwatch* than true gamer legend D.Va, and this little creation captures all of her personality and attitude nicely in chibi form. You can find some other heroes in this form too, of course.

gear.blizzard.com

SOMBRA PILLOW

PRICE: **£24.99**

If you have a long day of hacking planned then it's important not to neglect proper lumbar support. A healthy core is a healthy body or something like that. We imagine Sombra would agree, which must be why she's put her name to this excellent pillow. Great for some additional comfort in front of your PC screen.

gear.blizzard.com



WINSTON PLUSH

PRICE: **£34.99**

He's *Overwatch*'s cuddliest hero, and now he's *Overwatch*'s cuddliest soft toy too. This Winston plush is a great recreation of his in-game form, including a rather fetching pair of spectacles on his charming face. Really, this a perfect balance of adorable and powerful. Who wouldn't feel more protected with this around?

gear.blizzard.com

MERCY STATUE

PRICE: **£154.99**

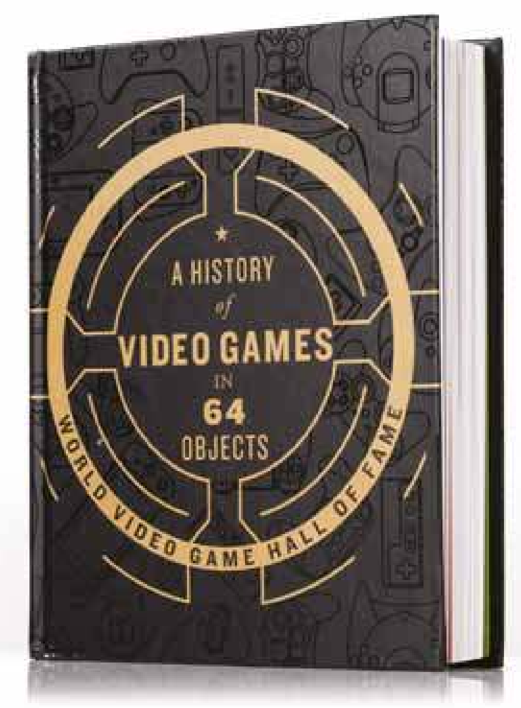
If you're a regular *Overwatch* player then you should be down on your knees thanking the gamer gods for players who play as Mercy and save your backside time and time again. Well, now when you get to praying you can do it in front of this statue to really do the job properly.

gear.blizzard.com



A HISTORY OF VIDEO GAMES IN 64 OBJECTS

PUBLISHER: **DEY STREET BOOKS**



Few things can connect you more quickly to a place or time in history than an object. There's something about a physical artefact of the subject that makes it seem more real, more relatable and so it is with this excellent collection from the World Video Game Hall Of Fame at The Strong National Museum Of Play in Rochester, New York. Along with things you might expect like copies of *Super Mario Bros* or *Tetris* and even a dug-up copy of *ET*, this book chronicles some of the connected historical items that fed into or were tangential to the growth of electronic play.

So, along with arcade cabinets and some fantastic design documents (such as Jordan Mechner's original photo sources for rotoscoping the animation in *Prince Of Persion*), you will find electronic games like Simon, Mattel Football, and the Speak & Spell. On top of this, the book includes looks at Nintendo's *Love Tester* from 1969, an early foray into electronic entertainment, of a sort, many years before the company moved into videogames.

It's these connected items that offer some of the most interesting historical insight into the growth of gaming both as an entertainment form and as a cultural phenomenon. A good example of the later is Ralph Baer's Light Anti-tank Weapon, built from a decommissioned rocket launcher for a virtual tank shooting experience. It was both an early example of light gun technology from 1979 and of early military interest in the application of electronic simulation for training purposes.

It's safe to say that we found this to be a fascinating book that breaks well out from the confines of traditional retrospectives, and is all the stronger and more interesting for it.

www.harpercollins.co.uk

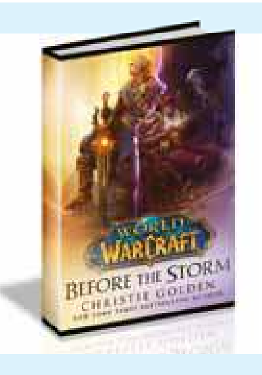




PLAYING WITH POWER: NINTENDO NES CLASSICS

Much like *Playing With Super Power*, which we looked at last issue, this collection takes a deep dive into the games that appear on the NES Classic Mini, which means its scope is narrow, but very focused. Another great celebration of a classic console.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BEFORE THE STORM

As far as tales of Horde and Alliance coming together to face a common foe go, *Before The Storm* is a pretty classic execution of the form. Following a combined effort against the Burning Legion, a new threat and potential power has emerged from the ashes.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



DRAGON AGE: THE STOLEN THRONE

This prequel novel to *Dragon Age: Origins* is written by the series' lead writer David Gaider, and looks at the overthrow of the Ferelden throne and the uprising that followed. This deluxe version also features 24 new illustrations from a range of artists.

www.darkhorse.com



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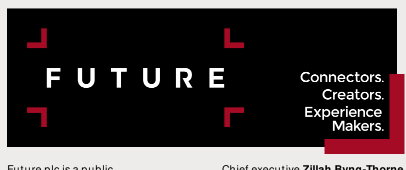
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